After The Rain: Part Two

VraieEsprit

Tenchi Muyo

Complete

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VraieEsprit

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Summary

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Description

9 months after Kagato slew his father, his plans to become Emperor are moving at speed, threatening even his friends as he discovers his dark roots. Meanwhile, Washu is forced to face the hardest moment of her life and Najya's secret self is revealed...

Chapter 1

Introduction and Disclaimer

This is part two of my Washu Prequel — designed to tag into context with the other Tenchi stories I have written to date, but set back into a past era, around the time when Ryoko was first born.

For anyone unfamiliar with my stories, some things must be briefly outlined. Firstly, the basis for my stories is Tenchi Universe, but that doesn't mean that other concepts from other series have not been dragged kicking and screaming into the plot. Many OVA concepts and a few from other series such as GXP or Tokyo have been added, so in some ways it has moved into AU Tenchi fanfiction, rather than TU Tenchi fanfiction. That's just how things worked out… but in any case, it isn't based around the backstories Washu and the other characters have set in stone for the OVA. Instead, it is a "how Washu's past might have been" scenario, based on the footholds given us in TU plus a few concepts from the OVA and original thinking of my own designed to fit in with that foundation.

If you have read Dark Heart, Dying Tree and others in that continuity, this is the essential background hinted at from time to time regarding Washu, Kagato and the events leading up to the conception of Ryoko. There is no TxR action in this story, because Tenchi isn't born yet, and nor is Ryoko! However, hopefully that won't be a reason for people not to read!

Certain OVA continuity characters, such as Najya (Naja) Akara and Mikamo Niwase (Mikamo Kuramitsu) have been pulled in to pad out Washu's history in a more canon-friendly way. But the bulk of the concepts and how they tie in together have been worked out myself, without any real reliance on the SHIN novels to provide background. For this reason, do not expect Mikamo or Najya to appear in exactly their SHIN novel incarnations. (Kajishima-san already wrote that, after all… there's not much point in anyone regurgitating the same story over again!).

My final caveat is to mention my butchered Jurai family tree. This is probably far more prevalent in the After the Rain stories than it is in the later ones, because of Kagato's involvement. Tenchi Universe gives us few clues to the Royal Family of Jurai, and is even self-contradictory about the Imperial throne at times. For this reason I

have merged the concepts of the OVA with the TU idea that Ayeka and Yosho are NOT half-siblings, and created a mishmashed royal family tree. This means, of course, that Ayeka's father is no longer Azusa, and that goes ditto for Sasami. He is still the father of Yosho, however, and in my writing he is the Uncle of the two Princesses instead. (But if you've read Dark Heart et al, you'll know that already).

Final note: Usual legal info applies ;) Oh yes… and… erm… this probably isn't going to be a very happy story, so if you get easily upset by drastic and emotional events, you might want to look away now . Hankies at the ready everyone… here we go!

Synopsis

It's been almost a year since Washu first arrived on Jurai, and finally their painstaking, intensive work on the Juraian gemstones has begun to pay off. Mikamo Niwase has finally broken the jewel's seal — but only he and his enigmatic friend Prince Kagato know the true depths of their top secret project.

As Mikamo seems to weaken, Kagato only gains in strength and ambition, awakening the dark magic within him as he ruthlessly pursues his desire for the Juraian crown. After the murder of his father, Kagato knows that there will be others in his way as he battles for supremacy — but some losses are harder to bear than others, and in ridding himself of one potential foe he finds himself awakening another — one with bitterness in her heart and vengeance on her mind.

Meanwhile, Yosho is still doggedly searching for his missing fiancée, and Haru is convinced that his father has been playing a dangerous game with the succession and his wife's health. Spiriting Misaki away to a distant planet for her own safety, Haru fights to keep her location a secret as he struggles to protect the unborn child who will one day inherit all of Jurai…

AFTER THE RAIN: PART TWO
A TENCHI MUYO! Fanfiction
by

VRAIEESPRIT

"So, it is indeed true."

Prince Haru of Jurai sat back against the high carved back of his finely-covered seat, casting his companion a pensive look as he considered the implications of her words. "And you are certain, Misaki-chan? There is no doubt in your mind that this is the way things are?"

The woman let out a sigh, lifting her slender form from the chaise upon which she had been resting, and pulling her wrap more tightly around her body as she turned to gaze out of the window. Even in profile, with the sun's rays casting a shadow across her face, Haru could see that his wife's eyes were clouded and troubled. He bit his lip, remembering the last time the Lady Misaki had brought him this kind of news.

"It was so different last time." Misaki seemed to echo his thoughts, turning towards him at that moment and offering him a faint smile. "Haru, I know that it must seem strange to you, that I'm so tired and anxious. But I have to be honest — I'm afraid. Things are far too convenient for my liking — I'm almost certain your father has been conspiring against us. And now, if he was to discover this… I really don't know what he would do."

She stifled an involuntary shiver, and Haru got to his feet, slipping a gentle arm around her slight frame.

"I won't let anything happen to you." He murmured softly, and Misaki leant her head against his shoulder, nodding as she met his gaze.

"I know." She agreed. "I trust you, Haru, but I scarcely know who else I can. I've heard of court intrigue before, even seen it in play. But I've never been on the receiving end and it scares me. Especially now. I can't go through all of those things again, you know. I can't… I can't lose another one. I just couldn't bear it."

"And you won't." Haru said firmly, taking her by the hand and leading her across to the chaise, sitting down and ushering her down beside him. "Listen to me. I know you're tired, and I know you've not slept well these last few days. You've been restless and unlike yourself, and now the two of us know why. You must try and relax, my dear. Even if it is hard to do. We will think of some solution. Whatever Father has planned, we will outwit him. I promise that we will."

Misaki was silent for a moment, and Haru eyed her keenly, taking in her appearance as he did so. She was always beautiful, he told himself absently, and even now, so many years after her face had first captured his heart, she still had that same magic in her pretty fuschia eyes. Her cheeks were pale, and her brow lined with worry, but she was still the beautiful Lady he had married on her sixteenth birthday, and his heart skipped a beat as he remembered all their hopes and dreams so long ago.

"So many hopes." He murmured, and Misaki started, staring up at

him in confusion.

“Haru?”

“I was just thinking about when we married.” Haru looked self-conscious. “How much we hoped for, then. And how things are now.”

“Do you still love me now as you loved me then, Haru?” Misaki’s voice was faint, and Haru nodded, his brow creasing in consternation.

“Yes, of course. Why would you think I would not?” He asked. Misaki shrugged.

“I suppose I didn’t.” She replied. “I just wanted to be sure. To hear you say it. I never doubt you, Haru, but when everything is so unstable…”

She trailed off, and Haru sighed, nodding his head.

“I know.” He agreed. “But I will always love you, Misaki-chan. And protect you — with my life, if need be. If you want me to take Father on about this, then I will. You know I will. If that’s what it takes…”

“No!” Misaki looked alarmed. “Haru, Shigure-sama has Jurai’s power coursing through him and a horrible, terrible temper when he is aroused! He would hurt you — maybe even kill you, and you have no like magic with which to defend yourself! And I need you, Haru. More than ever now, I need you.”

She hesitated, then slipped her hand down across her gown, her fingers brushing her stomach briefly.

“I want to keep this one.” She whispered. “And whichever it be — boy or girl — they need a strong father such as you, my love. I won’t fight for them alone. I can’t… I don’t think I’m strong enough.”

Haru eyed her fondly, taking her hand once more in his and squeezing it tightly.

“Then I have another suggestion.” He said quietly. “I think that you should leave Jurai — and as soon as is humanly possible.”

“Haru?” Misaki stared, and Haru nodded his head.

“It’s the only other solution that comes to mind.” He responded. “You know that you have lands of your own, territory we rarely even visit and hardly ever use. There are planets which are remote and of little interest to my father, simply because they belong to your family inheritance, rather than that of the direct royal tree. One of them, if I’m not much mistaken, is where we spent a good portion of our honeymoon, before our progress through Jurai’s territories. It’s a

peaceful, floral paradise, and just the place for a Princess in need of relaxation."

He hesitated, then,

"And for a mother-to-be to prepare." He added.

"But… without you?" Misaki looked horrified. "Haru, I just told you — I can't!"

"I think you must." Haru said grimly. "Look. There's no coincidence in the fact that you and I have been wanting a child for many years, but have never managed to conceive. I know Father hates me, and I understand why he would seek to blight my line, but this time he's been caught out. I've kept close eyes on your food, and ensured everything we both consume is specially and meticulously prepared by our own staff. As a result, our curse seems to have been lifted. He won't be pleased, if he finds that out. We need to take steps… and if you are not here, he cannot see you as the child grows. You might conceal it now, my love, but as time passes…"

"You're right." Misaki sighed heavily, glancing down at her fingers as she did so. "In all respects. There is no way to keep from the Emperor that I am with child a second time. But to leave my home, my friends, and my family — must I be so drastic, Haru? Must it be that way?"

"I can't think of another answer, can you?" Haru rested his hands on her shoulders, meeting her doubtful eyes with earnest reddish ones. "We won't tell anyone the truth of why you've gone. In fact, I'll put about that you've contracted a severe ailment and have been prescribed rest and distance from court whilst you recover… that should keep people at bay, if they believe you've been quarantined for whatever reason."

"And you won't even tell Aiko?" Misaki asked hesitantly. "She's the closest thing I've ever had to a sister — it would seem odd not to."

"The fewer who know the better, although I agree that not to tell Aiko would be against my judgement, too." Haru sighed. "Perhaps we can trust her, but nobody else. And Aiko must be sworn to secrecy. Not even Oniisama or Prince Kagato must be taken into confidence, because the more people who know, the more who could whisper of it to Father."

"I think we can trust Aiko." Misaki said frankly. "And I'd be happier, if she knew the truth."

"Perhaps I could persuade her to travel with you, and stay a few

days to see you settled in." Haru pondered. "It would seem strange if I were to abandon my duties and come, although I don't like the idea of you going anywhere alone. Aiko avoids all responsibility like the plague, and Father is enough of a chauvinist not to care if she isn't around the court. He might even be glad of her absence, and I know my sister would appreciate a holiday."

"That sounds almost like an invitation, Haru-niichan." A playful voice came from the doorway at that moment, causing the couple to start guiltily, turning as one person towards the entrance to the chamber. Aiko let out a low chuckle at their expressions, sweeping into the chamber and pulling the door shut behind her with a neat click as she deposited herself gracefully on the window-seat.

"Well?" She demanded, eying them expectantly. "What's this about a holiday? Are you planning on taking some time away from Jurai, my brother?"

"No, but Misaki is." Haru pursed his lips. "Aiko-chan, how long have you been listening?"

"No time at all, but I heard your voices and came to say hello." Aiko said carelessly. "It's not often I find you in this part of the palace — you don't usually hide away in your own chambers when court is in session, Haru. What's the occasion?"

Haru sighed, rubbing his temples.

"We are quite alone, Haru." Misaki said quietly, casting the newcomer a brief, fleeting smile. "And we are both agreed that Aiko can be taken into our trust."

"Trust?" Aiko pursed her lips, looking interested. "Do I sense some courtly intrigue, then? Do tell! Everything is so boring at the moment. My son is obsessing about his science projects, and nobody has any interesting scandals to spread or to share. Father is growing ever more paranoid and nothing interesting ever happens. Will you tell me your exciting story? I'm dying to know more."

"We had intended to tell you anyhow, Aiko-chan." Haru assured her. "But before we do, we must ask you to keep what we tell you a closely guarded secret. As closely guarded as the one we keep for you about your son, or perhaps even more so. Nobody outside of this room is to know of it, and we will not speak of it in public. Not even Kagato or Azusa. Nobody."

"Nobody?" Aiko's clever eyes widened. "I see. This is a pretty big secret then, I trust?"

“Potentially.” Misaki bit her lip.

“Well, you can take it as read that I can be trusted, although I will swear it in blood and ink if you’d prefer.” Aiko’s eyes twinkled. “I’m looking forward to hearing this. It sounds potentially juicy.”

“Aiko, I’m with child a second time.” Misaki spoke softly.

“With…” Aiko’s eyes softened. “Well, my sister, and congratulations to you both! But I don’t understand — why such a secret? Why wouldn’t you want everyone to share in your happy news?”

“Because the last time we had such news to share, someone wasn’t as glad as we were to hear it.” Haru said bitterly. Aiko’s eyes almost fell out of her head.

“Are you suggesting that Misaki’s miscarriage was not simply a tragedy?” She whispered. “That someone conspired against her and you in order to remove her baby from the equation?”

“Yes.” Misaki agreed miserably. “And since no further attempt has been made on my life, Aiko, I’m certain that the sole purpose was to rid me of my child. More than that, Haru has discovered something else. Something which explains why it has taken me so very long to conceive a child at all.”

“Such as?” Aiko looked incredulous.

“Certain herbs used in preparing dishes meant for Misaki’s table.” Haru said grimly. “The only one with the power to order such a thing would be Father, and considering his overwhelming dislike for me, I can only imagine he does not want me to provide an heir.”

“You think Father would go to such lengths?” Aiko stared. Haru shrugged.

“Who else could have such control over what we ate?” He asked. “Yes, Aiko, I believe he has done everything in his power to prevent Misaki from conceiving, just in case a child of mine should prove a threat to his preferred line — to his precious Prince Yosho and Azusa’s kin. And with all the uncertainty about Yosho’s behaviour nine months ago, he acted rashly and decidedly in regards to our child. You won’t know this, Aiko, because you don’t work as closely as I do with the security side of royal affairs. But some of the Knights of Jurai have been trained as assassins, to be used in times of war against an infiltrating enemy. Father controls the Knights and holds their loyalty in his hands. The trail of blood leads right back to the Imperial throne. There seems very little doubt.”

Aiko swore softly under her breath, using very un-princesslike language as she settled herself more comfortably against the glass. Anger flickered in her ruby eyes, and Misaki reached out a hand to touch her arm.

“Aiko, you must not confront Shigure-sama about what we suspect.” She added anxiously. “He is the King of Jurai, whatever he chooses to do, and even if what he does is hateful sometimes, we’d put ourselves in grave danger to question him. I want to bear this child and be a mother at last. I don’t care whether he strikes it from the succession. I just want a family, and I don’t want him to bear me any further ill will than he already does.”

Aiko sighed, and Haru could see she was fighting with herself. At length she nodded, raising her head.

“All right.” She said reluctantly. “I will say nothing and do nothing. I will act as if you didn’t say anything of it to me at all. But I am angry, Misaki, if you are correct. To risk your child’s life is bad enough, but to put yours in jeopardy also just to feed his own insecurities…”

She sighed again.

“So you will leave Jurai?”

“For a time, yes.” Misaki met Haru’s gaze, and Haru nodded.

“Misaki is going to travel to one of the private planets left to her as part of her family’s legacy.” He said softly. “And Aiko, I would be very grateful if you would go with her — at least for a while. Father will notice my absence more than yours, after all — and I don’t want her to go alone.”

“You needn’t even ask. Of course.” Aiko agreed, grasping her sister-in-law’s hand tightly. “I’d be glad to, you should know that. Court without Misaki would be a dull place, brother — no offence to your company.”

“None taken.” Haru looked rueful. “I’m well aware that you inherited enough life and spirit for the both of us.”

“I try.” Aiko quipped, then she became serious. “But what will you say to Father? How will you explain Misaki’s sudden departure?”

“We are going to tell him that she is unwell, and has been prescribed rest away from court. Quarantine, if you will.” Haru said levelly. “The exact details are not yet clear… but that is the plan.”

“Well, it must be convincing.” Aiko looked doubtful. “Something

serious. Even potentially fatal, Haru-niichan. Something which takes Misaki out of Father's line of sight completely. If he believed, for example, that she had developed some genetic frailty in her family line, and that her life was in danger… perhaps even that it was beyond all help…"

"That's slightly melodramatic." Haru scolded. "There's no need for Father to think Misaki is on her deathbed."

"But you can't look for someone you don't believe lives." Aiko said softly. "I could go with her, then return in mourning rags. If people believed Misaki was dead, who would look for her?"

"They might notice the lack of a body."

"But of course, Misaki would be laid to rest at her family's estate, wouldn't she?" Aiko said simply. "With her father and her mother and everyone else who died in the terrible fire so long ago. That would be your wish, would it not, Misaki-chan? To be reunited with those you lost when you were just a small child?"

"Perhaps the Emperor would believe so." Misaki said slowly. "Since he doesn't know me as well as he might, and he imagines that all noble children hold their family ties above those of the families they marry into. But I would always rather be here, Aiko. Jurai has been my home since I was orphaned, and I wouldn't wish to be so far from Haru, even in death. So…"

"Stop being so morbid, the pair of you." Haru held up his hands. "For now, we will just tell people Misaki is sick. If we imagine any further danger, Aiko, you might have a chance to put your drama into play… but for the time being, first things first. Misaki is pale but she doesn't look deathly ill. I won't have this ruined because you have a penchant for exaggeration."

Aiko sighed.

"Fine, then." She said resignedly. "I'll go along with whatever you decide. So long as Misaki bears a healthy baby this time, that is all that matters."

"Yes." Misaki said pensively. "And so long as I can protect that baby from Imperial wrath so long as I might need to, also. It's a frightening thought already, Aiko. But I won't lose a second child. So this is how it must be."

The rain was heavy across the Arian skyline, as the woman pulled

her hood more tightly around her face, fastening it against the wisps of silvery hair that threatened to escape into the elements. As she forged forward down the pathway that led to the Arian consulate, the building loomed tall on the horizon, and she paused for a moment, eying it with a grim sense of recognition.

So it had come to this, she mused absently. After almost nine months, she had been forced to carry out her own investigations further afield.

"Najya." A voice from the muggy greyness attracted her attention, and she turned her head, offering her companion a rueful smile as she held up her hands in greeting. The woman grinned back at her, grasping her loosely around her wrists as together they blurred and flickered out of sight, re-materialising within the safety of her contact's chambers.

"The weather is foul." Najya Akara slipped off her coat, shaking it liberally before hanging it up on an empty peg. "Of all the days for me to come back here, I had to pick a deluge. You might have warned me that it was the rainy season, Aya. I would have picked my days better."

"I'm sorry you had to come at all, but Father insisted." The woman known as Aya bit her lip, eying her companion hesitantly. "He wants to know what you've learnt — considering what we suspect, I think it's become signficant."

"I don't spend all of my time on Jurai spying for the Akara clan, you know." Najya sighed, dropping down into an empty seat. "It's not so simple. I mean, I'm a scientist. I chose that life… even if I knew it wasn't going to be all-encompassing. I might have known that Father had some part in pulling the strings for me to go to Jurai, though. Why else would they have allowed an Arian entry so easily, even on Mikamo-sensei's recommendation? But it sounds as though I should have come here, instead. If what you believe is true, it means that all our hopes might well be in vain. For Airai and for future relations with Jurai, as well as peace with the Saotome clan."

"I wouldn't trust them." Aya's reddish eyes darkened, and she shook her head. "I know you want it to work, oneesama, and I know that Father hoped it might prevent bloodshed between our people. But even if there was a true, pure line of the Saotome who didn't seek conflict, there are plenty of dark rats lurking in the shadows, waiting to pounce. I'm still sure now of what I thought that day, when Akito-san first disappeared. From your description, I believe the man who came to meet him was Kagato of Jurai, and that Kagato is as you

suspected — a Saotome beneath his royal regalia."

"I have no doubts." Najya shook her head decisively. "Kagato is a Saotome, that is certain. He has the tell-tale golden eyes that identify his true clan heritage — they're there for all to see. The son of Akito Saotome, if my sources are to be believed. But I did hope, given Akito-san's politics and views towards peace and magic, that his son might be in the same vein. That by travelling to Airai and working with him on his project, I might find a way to breach the gap between our worlds. Politics are still rocky on Jurai — the Crown Prince's son still seeks to abscond with some woman into the bleak, and Kagato might yet find himself made Prince in his stead. I had thought… maybe… if he truly was Akito-san's son, he might find sympathy for Airai in his policies, and even be in a position to bring peace to the warring Cults of Airai in a way we've never managed before. It's not in our interests to betray his legitimacy, and I wouldn't address it with him in that light. I hoped maybe I'd find an ally — one who thinks with the same mind as we do about the future."

"But he's still a Saotome." Aya said bitterly. "And Akito-san hasn't been seen since that day, eight months ago. I'm sure some evil has befallen him, and that it can be traced back to the Saotome clan in some respect. I believe this Kagato Jurai of yours is probably a truer member of their cult than Akito and his family ever were. And it angers me, oneesama. Akito was a good and kind man, who never caused anyone any trouble. If he was slain by his own son, it proves that a very dangerous man is potentially in a position of great political power."

"A man who may yet exploit his connections to the Saotome to further his own ends. I know. I've thought that way myself." Najya sighed. "But it is difficult to glean proof. He is a very intelligent man, imoto-chan, and I don't have anything to wield against him in the way of evidence. It's just supposition, and to even raise that I would have to expose my own purpose in all of this. I'm enjoying my role on Jurai, as the scientist I've always trained to be. I'm not the Akara mage yet, and I won't be until father passes away. To reveal my true nature to them now would be dangerous — I don't have half of the magic I need to protect myself or anyone else against an attack."

"You are far from incompetent, sister." Aya scolded. Najya nodded her head.

"True enough, but this is a dangerous game we're playing." She said with a sigh. "My room-mate is already the kind of person who I have to work hard to fool. I like her a great deal, and I think I could

even make an ally of her, if it came to it. But then, I feel she hides things from me, also. Much as I'd like to trust her wholly, I'm not sure whether I can or not. She's a self-confessed Kii, and you know how badly things ended on that planet. I… I'm not totally sure whether the Washu I know is the real one — or if that's even her real name. Sometimes I'm not sure. I can tell she has secrets… and it bothers me a little. I'm very much on my own, in fact."

"What about this man you know? This Seniwan scientist?" Aya asked. "What about him? You trust him, don't you?"

"Yes, but I wouldn't bring him into danger. He's Seniwan. He has no magic." Najya dismissed this with a flick of her wrist. "So you see, all I can do is sit, wait and watch for something that would allow me to bring the Saotome connection out into the open. If Prince Kagato imagined that I — and others like me — knew of his illegitimacy, we might all be in danger. For now I think, it's far better to keep in the shadows. And just wait."

"Akito-san did not deserve to become a victim." Aya said softly, and Najya's expression became gentle.

"I know. He was your friend, and you feel you failed in your duty to him." She said quietly. "But you couldn't have known what would happen. There had been no sign of any threat or interest in him from the Saotome for a long time… in fact, it was as if they washed their hands of him and his entire line. It wasn't for sure, that Kagato-sama was his son. You couldn't have done anything to protect him."

"Maybe. But I feel like I should have anyway." Aya sighed. "Still, perhaps we're wrong. Maybe he's not dead. Maybe he's still out there, somewhere… forced into hiding by something the prince told him. Maybe we misjudge Kagato, in the end — perhaps he came as an ally to his father, not as a foe."

"Perhaps." Najya agreed cautiously. "Do you think it likely?"

"No." Aya owned. "But it's the only strength I have — to believe that he's still out there, somewhere."

"Aya-chan, you were fond of him, weren't you?" Najya's eyes opened wide. "More than just a friend… you liked him!"

"I did." Aya pinkened, as she nodded her head. "Even though he was old enough to be my father, I confess that I did. But it was only on my side, oneesama. He loved another, though he never spoke of her. I was nothing more than a daughter or a younger sister to him — I could tell. His heart belonged to someone else — someone he never

saw, but someone he never forgot, either."

"Kagato-dono's mother?" Najya wondered. "The Lady Aiko of Jurai?"

Aya shrugged her shoulders.

"I don't know." She admitted. "Maybe. It might be a line of enquiry, if the Princess Aiko has had contact from Akito-san since."

"I can't imagine she'd be so indiscreet, if she even kept contact with her son's father." Najya frowned. "I don't know, Aya. It seems wrong to me, that she'd take that risk."

"Perhaps." Aya's eyes flickered thoughtfully. "But Akito did often receive mail from Jurai, you know. It's not impossible."

"Then I must return to Jurai, and see what transpires." Najya got to her feet slowly. "Tell Father that I'll be in touch again as soon as I can. I haven't forgotten what he's asked of me, although our political hopes seem to be in tatters, if Kagato is capable of what we think he is. I badly want peace between Jurai and Airai, Aya. So badly I'll risk my life and everything else to get it. With the support of a strong Juraian king, we could quash some of the more subversive cults and quell the fear of dark magic that so pervades our world. Airai is more than just black magicians and tainted mages, after all."

"You know we all support you in that, Najya." Aya said softly. "Go safely, and take care. We know what you do for us — for all of Airai. The Saotome are the worst of the dark cults within Airai's population. If we could bring them to book, we might have a chance of improving Airai's reputation and trade, even re-establishing the ancient empire that was once so profitable. People here need the trade relations and diplomatic connections of other worlds, but people are afraid to come here because they believe their souls might be stolen if they do. And given the expansion of the Saotome and the way in which they've progressed that particular base magic, I can understand why. That's why I hoped your plan would work."

"And if I am wrong, and Kagato Jurai proves to be a true Saotome, I will have to find the strength to kill him." Najya said matter-of-factly. "And we will go back to the drawing board."

"Be careful, my sister. Remember that Airai's hopes rest with you as well as ours." Aya touched her gently on the cheek, and Najya smiled, seeing the tears in the woman's identical dark red eyes. She nodded her head.

"I will. Stay safe yourself, and don't get dragged into boundary

disputes." She said gently. "If you discover more on Akito-san, then tell me — but otherwise, I think it safer not to call me back here if you can help it. I know that Father would rather any conversation was conducted on Arian soil, not over intercom on an alien world… but I don't want to alert anyone to our true purpose."

"Okay. I promise." Aya nodded her head. "And if it comes to you killing Kagato, Najya, don't let it be traced back to you or to us. The Akara need allies, so act with caution."

"You know I shall, even if it kills me." Najya said firmly. "Farewell, imoto-chan. Send Father my love… I must return to Jurai before I am missed."

"All right." Aya hesitated for a moment, then flung her arms around her older sister. "Please, don't come back dead. Promise me. Don't come back dead."

"I'll do my best." Najya laughed, disentangling herself from the younger girl's embrace. "Now, let me go… and we'll see how things pan out from hereon in."

Chapter 2

Chapter Two

“Jurai seems so peaceful, so early in the morning.”

Professor Washu Hakubi sat back on her hands, a carefree, laughing sparkle in her emerald eyes as she cast her gaze across the landscape, taking in the tree-shrouded settlements that sprung up every which way. Between them, glittering streams and white-stone roads connected the cities like veins to Jurai’s heart, and as she sat there, a sense of peace washed through her entire body. “Don’t you think so, Mikamo-kun? That we’ve travelled an awful long way to find paradise, but now it’s within our grasp?”

“What has you so philosophical this morning, Washu?” Her companion, Professor Mikamo Niwase turned to look at her, offering her a smile as he took in her expression. “I don’t think I’ve seen you like this often since the day we met — what has you so relaxed and at home? This is Jurai, remember. And you are the woman who never believes that anything she sees is what it seems.”

“I know, but today just seems above all that. Something in the air, or the atmosphere… I don’t know which.” Washu pinkened, sending her companion a sidelong glance. “Or maybe it’s the company. We don’t get many mornings to come out here and be alone, you know. It makes it all the more valuable to me, when we do.”

“Well, another few months and we’ll likely have all the time in the world to do things like this. After all, we won’t have anything else to do.” Mikamo said with a wry smile. “No jobs, no science academy, nothing like that to fall back on. It will be an adventure, Washu-chan — are you sure you can handle it?”

“I like a bit of excitement, here and there.” Washu’s eyes sparkled with amusement. “Of course. You’re worth it to me. And the longer we work here, the closer I feel we’ve become. Even if hiding it from everyone has been difficult, it’s still been worthwhile. I’m glad you asked me to Jurai, Mikamo. I really am. Even if we did have things to resolve — I’m happy I came.”

“Good.” Mikamo touched her gently on the cheek, kissing her. “Because so am I.”

“Your family doesn’t suspect anything, I trust?” Washu asked,

slipping her hands playfully into his as he pulled her to her feet. Mikamo shook his head.

“No.” He agreed. “Even when my mother visited Lady Aiko last month, I don’t think they discussed me or my science at all. I don’t think Mother cares much what I do, so long as I don’t damage the family reputation. And what she doesn’t know won’t hurt her… I’m not going to give you up, so she might as well stay out of it.”

“Prince Yosho is down there… look.” Washu gazed down over the edge of the precipice, a thoughtful look touching her expression as she eyed the young man below them. “I feel bad for him, in a way. He obviously still loves this Haruna girl… when I’m with you, I feel almost guilty. You and I are going to get what we want, but he’s stuck in this social ritual and he can’t escape it.”

“Short of giving up the throne completely, he can’t.” Mikamo agreed. He pursed his lips, then, “Of course, that might yet still happen. From what I understand, he hasn’t given up hope of finding the Lady Haruna.”

“There are hundreds of planets where King Shigure might have had her stashed.” Washu said dismissively. “And his spaceship has been grounded. He’ll have a job getting to her.”

“I don’t know.” Mikamo looked thoughtful. “I think that he’s pretty determined. And I wouldn’t be surprised if he succeeded. After all, it isn’t as if he’s operating on his own. He has supporters.”

Washu’s eyes narrowed and she cast her companion a quizzical look.

“Are you helping him to find her?” She demanded. “Because if you are…?”

“Helping him?” Mikamo stared at her, then frowned. “Why in hell would you think that? I may have known Prince Yosho once, but only in passing. He’s never really been a close friend. Why would I get involved in something so messy? You have to be kidding.”

“You said he had supporters.” Washu frowned. “It implied you knew more than you were saying.”

“I said that?” Mikamo looked stricken. “I don’t remember… are you sure?”

“Mikamo, look me in the eye and tell me you have nothing to do with Prince Yosho and his girl?” Washu gripped her companion by the shoulders, turning him to face her, and Mikamo frowned, doing as he

was bidden.

“I have nothing to do with it. On my life and on our future together, I haven’t lifted a finger to find Haruna-sama and I won’t, either.” He said solemnly. “I’m sorry I gave you that impression. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“Mikamo.” Washu frowned, touching his cheek as she took in the confusion in his blue eyes. “You don’t remember what you said?”

“No, but I guess it’s not important. I was probably just rambling — mad scientists do that, as you probably know.” Mikamo’s eyes twinkled with amusement, but Washu could see the tiredness in his expression and her frown deepened. She shook her head, linking her arm in his as she led him away from the ledge.

“Mikamo-kun, you joke, but this concerns me.” She said softly. “I love you more than anything, you know that. But you must know that lately you’ve been — well, how shall I put this. Strange to talk to from time to time. In fact, ever since we began working in the laboratory on the Dark Heart and the sister gems… you’ve not been quite yourself. Are you sure you’re not working too hard? Running around with me is a full time job as it is, and you are leading this project. Maybe Prince Kagato is pushing you too hard… you should ask him to slow down.”

“Why?” Mikamo looked startled. “You think I’m acting strange? I hadn’t noticed it. I feel fine, Washu. A little tired, maybe. But fine, nonetheless. And I don’t mind being tired if it means I get to spend time with you alone, like this. When we’re in lab, it isn’t the same. I can’t talk to you like you’re my future wife and it annoys me. Here I can say what I choose… so don’t think that you’re any kind of a burden on me.”

“Well, if you’re sure.” Washu bit her lip. “It hasn’t affected me, but I’m used by now to the fact being Kii makes me more tolerant and I can go a lot longer without getting tired. I don’t want you to burn out.”

“I won’t. I’m fine. Believe me.” Mikamo assured her, squeezing her hand tightly. “Although if you like, I’ll tell Kagato about your concern.”

“Mikamo!” Washu protested, and Mikamo laughed, shaking his head.

“I was teasing you.” He said playfully. “Relax, will you? Take a joke. It’s a beautiful day, you said it yourself. And now you’re all tensed up… you really need to relax a hell of a lot more than you do.”

“Perhaps you’re right.” Washu sighed, nodding her head. “I read intrigue and implication into everything, don’t I — it’s an ugly habit of mine.”

She frowned, gazing back down at the folorn figure of the Prince.

“He must be lonely.” She murmured. “It radiates out from him like a beacon… his feeling of pain and regret. I know that feeling, Mikamo. I felt it when you left me at the Academy and first came to Jurai. I’m glad not to be a Princess. It would be so difficult.”

“If you were a Princess, of course, Mother and Father would fall over themselves to get you to marry me.” Mikamo said acerbically, and Washu stared at him in surprise.

“Mikamo?”

“Well, you know it’s true. Stupid, arrogant people that they are.” Mikamo sighed, rubbing his temples. “Yeesh. I think your paranoia is starting to rub off on me. Shall we walk back towards the complex, before we both become crazy? I imagine we’ll have to begin work soon, in any case. And I have some test results to review since yesterday. I can’t remember exactly where we got to, but I’m sure I can soon pick it up again.”

“Okay.” Washu nodded. She bit her lip, then, “I’m surprised you don’t remember. We’d just finished cataloguing the results from the first batch of transfer tests. We succeeded with the basic precepts, anyhow — you were pretty excited about it at the time.”

“So I was.” Mikamo looked rueful. “I remember now. What would I do without you to remind me?”

Washu did not answer, but her expression became troubled as they made their way slowly down the hill towards the science institute.

“Mikamo-sensei! Washu-chan!” As they reached the building, they were accosted by one of their colleagues, silver hair flying out behind her in the wind, and Mikamo smiled, raising his hand in a greeting.

“Najya! You’re early this morning — overly eager for you, isn’t it?”

“Especially since you weren’t in our room last night.” Washu added succinctly, watching as Najya coloured red.

“Najya?” Mikamo stared at her. “Were you… visiting someone else last night?”

“No… I was… I was working late.” Najya reddened further at his insinuation, shaking her head. “I didn’t keep track of time and I didn’t

suppose you'd notice, Washu-chan. More often than not you're not sleeping in our room either, you know."

"Perhaps not." Washu acknowledged ruefully. "But last night I did."

"Well, I guess I picked the wrong night for an all-nighter." Najya sighed. "Such is life."

"Did you discover anything interesting?" Washu linked arms with her friend, as Mikamo fumbled in his pocket for his pass key to the lab. "You must have had some kind of inspiration… anything that we can help you unravel?"

"No… it was a private project. Something I brought with me from the Academy." Najya pursed her lips. "I know it's wrong, on Kagato-dono's time, but even so…"

"We all do it. Don't worry about it." Washu's eyes danced with amusement. "Although the offer still stands. I'm more than happy to work through anything with you if you ever want a brain to bash your theories against — after all, I'm sure you'd do the same for me."

"Yes, of course." Najya offered her a smile. "And I will bear it in mind. Thank you."

"Mikamo, aren't we in yet?" Washu turned her attention back to her fiance, who was rummaging through his pockets, a bemused look on his face.

"I don't have my key." He said, his brow creasing in confusion. "That's so strange. I know I had it before I left my room this morning. I remember picking it up. At least… I think I did."

"Mikamo?" The levity died out of Washu's expression at this, and she took him gently by the hands, eying him in concern. "You forgot something else? You never forget your key… and you say that you're fine? I'm starting to worry about you! Paranoia or not, this isn't funny. You're not the absent-minded type."

"Love can do strange things to people, Washu." Najya observed. Washu shook her head.

"Maybe, but still." She said quietly. "Mikamo-kun, stop and think for a minute. Did you pick up your key this morning before you met me, or didn't you? And if you did, how could someone else have got hold of it?"

Mikamo opened his mouth to respond, then he faltered, shaking his head.

“I guess… I guess I didn’t.” He admitted, surprise on his face even as he spoke. “I thought I did, but I don’t actually remember picking it up. So it must still be on my dresser. I’m sorry, Washu. I suppose I was half thinking about our meeting and it slipped my mind.”

He cast her a rueful smile, touching her gently on the cheek.

“Don’t look so worried. Najya’s right. You’re distracting, and much more interesting than remembering a key.” He said affectionately. “Wait here. I won’t be long.”

With that he was gone across the grass, and Washu sighed, gazing after him with a troubled look in her eyes.

“It is just forgetting a key, Washu. Why the gusty sigh?” Najya asked gently. “You can’t read too much into a lovesick professor with too many secret assignations on his mind.”

“It’s not that.” Washu shook her head slowly, leaning up against the wall of the institute as she folded her arms across her chest. “It’s happening a lot lately — haven’t you noticed it? Little things, sure enough — but it adds up. Most disturbingly, he’s saying things and then forgetting he’s said them. He said something this morning which sounded… I don’t know. As if he knew something that might have political implications. But when I asked him about it, he didn’t remember what he’d said.”

“Or maybe he was covering his slip, considering he is much more in Prince Kagato’s confidence than we are.” Najya suggested. Washu shook her head.

“No.” She said firmly. “I have Kii sight, remember? I can tell. I’d know if he lied to me. I know him too well for it to be any other way. He really, truly forgot what he said.”

“Your Kii sight is always accurate? One hundred percent?” Najya eyed her companion hesitantly. Washu shrugged.

“I don’t know. I’ve never really had to analyse it.” She admitted. “But where Mikamo is concerned, I’d say so. I love this man, Najya. I know him better than I know anyone, and I’d know if he was lying to me deliberately. It wasn’t like that. It was more like he’d randomly babbled something and immediately forgot about it, like some absent-minded professor in a remote lab somewhere in the mountains. That’s not Mikamo and it’s starting to worry me. He seems so tired, too… it’s not like him at all.”

“Well, I hadn’t noticed, but from now I’ll pay attention.” Najya promised, her brows knitting together in a frown. “If you think there’s

something amiss. But it might just be juggling his work with your affair. He is going to be severing ties with his family at the end of this project, and that is quite a stressful thing for anyone. Even if you don't like your family, it must be strange for him to think of."

"Do you think he might… change his mind?" Washu looked anxious. Najya grinned, shaking her head.

"I don't think he'd give you up now. I've watched your little love-bird romance for the last nine months and when you know what's beneath the smiles and winks and careful positioning in the lab, it's almost too sweet to be true." She said playfully. "You don't need to worry. But he is the one who has to make the break… it might weigh on his mind, how they'll take it. I don't imagine for a second he's thought about backing out. But perhaps you should cut him some slack. You don't have a family, and you aren't making the same sacrifice he is to be with him. Do you see what I mean?"

"Yeah, I do." Washu nodded slowly. She pinkened again, offering Najya a smile.

"I might be a genius when it comes to science, but I've never been the most clued up individual when it comes to human nature." She admitted sheepishly. "And I'm never sure if it's going to be all right, allowing myself to invest so much… well, time and energy in one individual. But with him I couldn't help it. He accepted me… he truly did, for everything I am. Even my heritage — he never shied away from me at all. And that's a rare thing, Najya. To find someone like that."

"That's why I'm rooting for you both. I'm hoping for a happy ending." Najya dimpled. "And here comes the dashing beau now. Looks like he did leave his key in his room after all — another mystery solved."

"I hope it's the only mystery to solve." Washu said with a sigh. "But I guess we'll just have to wait and see. For now we've got other things on our worksheet for the day and even if Mikamo is Kagato-dono's best friend, I don't really want to tick him off too much. I want to stay for the time being, after all… at least till the project is done and Mikamo-kun and I can go!"

"So things are moving well, then, in the lab."

Kagato turned from the window of his study, casting his companion a slight smile. "That's good news, Tessei. It's about time that Mikamo

made some kind of firm progress. Time is ticking away, and Yosho's resolve only grows more the longer he is seperated from Haruna. I'm almost in mind to try and find the girl myself, but I can't risk his going until I am fully ready to carry out my plans."

"My Lord." Tessei bowed his head respectfully in his master's direction, hesitating for a moment, then, "If I may be so bold…?"

"You undoubtedly will be, whether I give you my consent or not." Kagato said wryly, leaning up against the wall as he regarded his knight with a thoughtful, almost predatorial smile. "Go on. What is bothering you, Tessei? Greed for money, influence and power, just as always?"

Tessei faltered, his gaze straying to the hilt of Kagato's sword, and the prince let out a low chuckle.

"I see." He said, amused. "I have promised you and Tetta eternal life, but you still fear the power of my sword? You are wise, but you have no need to fear me. I'm finding that immortality is a good incentive to make people loyal. My sword won't hurt you — not this time, anyway. Say what's on your mind, Tessei. I trust you are too sensible a man to consider betraying me."

"It's only that… that I've done as you requested, Prince Kagato." Tessei bowed his head, but when he raised his gaze again Kagato was aware of the flickering fear in the depths of his companion's normally serene gaze. "I have made further contact with your allies. The Saotome — the dark clan of Airai."

"I see." Kagato's lips twitched into a smile of pleasure and he crossed the study, lifting his sword and watching thoughtfully as it flared into life. Tessei took a hesitant step away from it, and Kagato looked amused, holding it aloft as he examined the glow of the blade.

"My sword has power, but it is not sword Tenchi." He murmured. "But we will rectify that, Tessei. Already I have begun to harness the magic of Airai and I will use it for my own ends. After all, a good leader must be ready to innovate and improvise, as the situations arise."

"Lord Kagato, it is my understanding that only those with blood of Airai can ever properly wield Arian magic." Tessei hazarded, his gaze never leaving the sword, and Kagato faltered for a moment, then smiled.

"Ah yes. This I have heard too." He murmured, running his fingers lovingly through the white-hot blade of light as he did so. It had

changed, he mused absently, since the day he had slain his father in cold blood — the sword no longer glimmered with such pure white energy, and if he gazed at it for long enough, he was almost sure he could see the man's blood staining the tip. He turned it over in his hands, pondering this for a moment, then he flicked the blade out, sliding the weapon into his belt.

"Do you doubt that I have the strength to control Airai's magic, Tessei?" He asked softly. "If the Saotome are willing to treat with me, do you have any right to question my intentions?"

"No, my Lord." Tessei said hurriedly. "But I seek to ensure your safety. After all…"

He faltered, and Kagato rolled his eyes.

"After all, if I'm to keep my promises to you and to Tetta, you need me to remain alive." He said blandly. "Your loyalty overwhelms me, Tessei. But as it happens, you have no reason to fear. There is more to this prince than simply the good breeding of Jurai's court. Trust me that I can handle the magic of the Airai, and worry no more about it. I am not weak. And the further on I go, the less limits I feel I have. I see the shackles of polite society falling away from me at every step… do you think that anyone will be able to stop me, the further on I go?"

Tessei did not answer, and Kagato eyed him wryly.

"I see." He murmured. "Well. We shall both have to wait to find out who is right. Go, Tessei. Return my message to the Saotome in your usual, discreet style. Tell them that I am willing to meet with them, if a representative should choose to come. Tell them that I have already learnt much, but I need to learn more, and I need their further assistance. They will be well rewarded, and that I am sure we can strike up some kind of agreement in return. And while you're at it, step up the search for Yosho's lovesick wench. Grandfather has done well this time, concealing her so cleverly from his Prince. But she must be somewhere, and that kind of information may yet prove valuable to me."

"Yes, sir." Tessei bowed again, withdrawing from the chamber hastily and as the door shut behind him, Kagato let out a low chuckle, turning back towards the window.

"He might not serve me so diligently if he knew of my illegitimate roots, but I do believe I can take advantage of my mother's little secret all the same." He murmured, gazing out thoughtfully across the horizon of his peaceful, delicate planet. "Airai and Jurai have been enemies for long enough, yet my Grandfather made me a bastard

Prince by refusing to allow my parents to marry. My entire claim to Jurai's throne rests on that decision, and it's not easily forgiven. He thinks Arian blood would taint his royal line, well, so it shall, and he will be one of those who pays the price for it, too. I'm not longer content with being next in the succession. I want to be Emperor of Jurai — and now I begin to have the power of my father's family invested in me, I will be difficult to stop. Even sword Tenchi will struggle against the might I'm going to unleash — the power of Tsunami and the magic of Airai intermingled into one being. I will be unstoppable."

He rested his elbows on the sill, his expression becoming thoughtful as he caught sight of the science institute, hidden as it almost was by a dense line of trees.

"It's not been an easy few months, drawing on something that I've never even known was there." He admitted to himself. "The power of Airai burns through me, I see it now, but it is difficult to tame and even more hard to conceal. Such rich power and strength and a desire to conquer… I have never felt like I do now, and concealing my developing strength from those around me is proving more and more of a challenge. Yet I am sure I am strong enough to master and control this Arian magic in myself, and I am certain that I can induce the Saotome to support me, if I can make it worth their while in the long run. After all, through my father, we are kin — and even if he was weak and without ambition, I am not. I'm sure I can mingle that power with these gemstones Mikamo has been working so hard on for me. The plan begins to pull together with remarkably little trouble and even less bloodshed, so far. Yes, all goes well."

"Kagato?"

At the sound of the voice, the prince turned, his schooled smile becoming genuine as he registered the presence of the scientist himself and he grinned, bowing his head mock-formally as he gestured for his friend to join him.

"Mikamo. I was just thinking about you, and the way your project has been progressing."

"You don't seem to think of much else, these days." Mikamo reflected, dropping down into an empty seat and returning his friend's smile. "Are you really that apprehensive about your future? Kagato, Yosho is still here. He may stay here indefinitely. You might have nothing at all to worry about."

"I like to be prepared for every eventuality. That's all." Kagato said

simply. “Mikamo, strange things happen on Jurai all the time. It’s as well to be ahead of the race. Plus, now that my Aunt has left Jurai…”

He paused, and Mikamo frowned.

“I heard about Lady Misaki’s illness.” He said softly. “Do you think she will recover? Lord Haru seems worried and strained, and I know your Lady Mother went with her, so it must be of some severity.”

“I believe so.” Kagato inclined his head slightly. “From the way mother spoke, I’m not sure whether Lady Misaki’s own life is in peril. Perhaps she’s still suffering ill effects from her tragedy nine months ago. It’s hard to tell — but for my Uncle to send away the one person at court who doesn’t think he looks like a monkey speaks volumes. Misaki-obasama must be very sickly indeed, for him to take such a wild leap. Perhaps she will die. It’s not beyond the realms of possibility.”

“You don’t sound so very concerned.” Mikamo’s brow furrowed, and Kagato offered him a rueful smile.

“I avoid my Uncle’s company as much as possible, so I don’t really know what the situation is.” He admitted. “But in truth, Mikamo, I’m trying not to focus on what it might mean. The implications frighten me, so I am trying to distance myself from it completely. If Misaki-sama dies, after all, it would mean that my Uncle would be a widower. And I can’t imagine any woman of Jurai’s court being foolish enough to marry him.”

“Meaning what, exactly?”

“I am not the only one who does not see eye to eye with my Uncle Haru.” Kagato sighed, sinking down into his own empty chair and resting his arms across his stomach as he met his friend’s gaze. “Mother hasn’t said anything to me, but she is far closer to Lady Misaki and Lord Haru than I am, and I overheard bits of a conversation, before Mother left with my aunt. From what they said, it sounds like they believe someone is poisoning Misaki — that someone has been plotting to kill her for a long time, and that they really want her out of the way.”

“Poison?” Mikamo’s eyes opened wide. “But why? Who would do a thing?”

“It would be indiscreet of me to share my Mother’s suspicions with you.” Kagato hesitated momentarily, and Mikamo frowned, nodding his head.

“I suppose it would.” He admitted. “I’m sorry. But it’s just so

strange. Why would someone seek to hurt Misaki-sama? She's not done anything to anyone!"

Kagato hesitated once more, and then he frowned.

"It is treason for me to speak his name in connection with such a crime." He said softly. "And I do not want to see you accused of treason, my friend. But from the little I heard and from the way my mother has been so stiffly polite to my Grandfather over the course of the last few days, I think… no, I am sure that they think him the cause of Obasama's illness. That being so, I wouldn't be surprised if Misaki-sama did pass away. My Grandfather is skilled in the art of secret, silent poison. And so I'm glad she is gone so far from here. If she is out of sight, maybe she will be out of mind, too."

"The Emperor?" Mikamo's face blanched as he absorbed his friend's words. "Are you sure? Kagato, it's not just me who would be accused of treason, if people started whispering about this around the court!"

"Which is why we will keep it between us, as friends do." Kagato said comfortably. "My mother did not tell me directly, so I am sure she does not want me embroiled in this matter. However, that Misaki-obasama's health is cause for serious concern is without a doubt. She is weak and sickly of late, if nothing else. Mikamo, the brief snippet of conversation I heard between her and my mother covered the subject of funerary arrangements and shrouds. I think my Aunt has left Jurai in order to die out of the Emperor's grasp."

Mikamo bit his lip, dropping his gaze to the floor.

"I see then why you are so frantic about my work." He murmured. "Your Aunt may be murdered at your Grandfather's hands, and Yosho may yet disappear into the blue. Your own life might be in real danger, Kagato, if what you're suggesting is true. If Shigure-sama is responsible for Lady Misaki's illness, then it must be considered whether or not he was somehow responsible for the loss of her child. And that would mean…"

"That he was so against the idea of a child of Uncle Haru's inheriting that he would go to the lengths of removing all risk." Kagato said softly. "Yes. I know. And Mother is Uncle Haru's twin sister, no more popular in the eyes of the Emperor than he is. You are right, my friend, and you understand my thoughts perfectly. If Misaki dies, Haru will produce no heir to rival Yosho or to provide an alternative claim to the throne. Mother will never re-marry, that seems sure, and she will never bear more children now. But there is still me, and I become more of a target with each passing day. If

Yosho will not settle his mind or his heart in Jurai's favour, I might be the next one on Grandfather's hitlist — or he might take his wrath out on Mother in some way, which I could not bear. If there was noone else to fall back on, after all, Yosho might be convinced that he must give his heart and soul to Jurai. I, and any child of my Uncle and Aunt are distractions… nothing more."

He sighed.

"You are my lifeline, Mikamo. That's why I need you so much, and why I am so glad of your company."

"Well, if that's the case, I bring good news." Mikamo's blue eyes sparkled slightly with anticipation as he remembered the reason for his coming. "We were running preliminary tests this morning in the lab and it seems almost certain that very basic amounts of energy can be transferred into the lesser density samples you provided me with. Since these are also Juraian mineral compounds, I don't see why it shouldn't be another step or two up before we can truly progress to the Dark Heart gems themselves."

"That is good news." Kagato's eyes lit up with pleasure. "And I'm grateful that you came here yourself to tell me. I find it hard to know who I can trust these days, other than you."

"Well, I don't think there are any politics within the institute." Mikamo assured him. "Just science and a lot of hard work."

"Perhaps." Kagato pursed his lips, then, "Mikamo, how well do you know Najya Akara?"

"Najya?" Mikamo looked confused, then, "As well as I know anyone I work closely with, I imagine. Why?"

Kagato schooled his features into a troubled expression, grasping his friend loosely around the wrists as he injected urgency into his golden eyes.

"I have heard one other thing of importance." He murmured. "You know how Airai are old enemies of Jurai, don't you?"

"Yes." Mikamo's brow furrowed in bewilderment. "And Najya is from Airai, but she's just a scientist, Kagato. Why should it bother you, having her here?"

"It pays to keep close tabs on political enemies, that's all." Kagato said quietly. "My mother is very fond of Arian imports — clothing, perfume, the like. She believes they have an exotic quality not found here on Jurai, and perhaps she is right. But there are many tales of

Airai and the dark arts practiced there. The name Akara meant something to me, so I did some research and I discovered why. The Akara are one of the major magical cults on Airai."

"Are you suggesting Najya is some kind of witch?" Mikamo's eyes opened wide with alarm. Kagato spread his hands.

"She does not seem so to me." He said cautiously. "But it's difficult to know for sure. I have never been to Airai, but I have heard many accounts of the conflict between powerful magical orders. People die in strange and inexplicable ways, and the power these mages wield is said to be that of a devil itself. I do not know whether Najya-sensei's name is a coincidence, but she may be a spy. Considering what work you do for me, it would be dangerous if anyone was to learn the true nature of our plans."

Mikamo bit his lip, looking troubled.

"I know and trust Najya. I don't think she's involved in any of those things." He said at length. "Akara is probably a common name on Airai, and it doesn't mean that she's mixed up in black magic."

"I hope you're right." Kagato said quietly. "And I wouldn't ask you to shun her, based on my paranoia or suspicion. But just take care, Mikamo. Be aware that she might not be who she claims to be, all right? I warn you as my friend, since I put you at such great risk already."

"I understand." Mikamo nodded, getting to his feet and offering his companion a smile. "And your concern is appreciated. But I'm pretty sure I know the real Najya, and you've nothing to worry about on those grounds. Things are tense for you, I know that, but don't see enemies where there aren't any — all right?"

"I'll do my best." Kagato promised. "And I've kept you long enough from your work. Thank you for your report, Mikamo. It's good to have some pleasant news in all of this chaos."

"Glad to oblige." Mikamo winked at him. "And no doubt I'll see you later on."

"Yes." Kagato agreed. "With Mother away, you must share my table at dinner. I find it tiresome to talk to myself, and people tend to think you odd, if you do."

"All right." Mikamo laughed. "I'll be there. Try not to fret too much about things, Kagato. We'll see you all right, you have my word on that."

With that he was gone, and Kagato moved to close the door behind him, pursing his lips as he did so.

“Yes, I know that you will.” He murmured. “If only everyone was so easy to work with. At least I can count on your fidelity, Mikamo — even if I am lying to you about many things. Still, if you knew I was illegitimate, you might feel differently too — so I can’t trust you with the full picture.”

He glanced at his hands, a thoughtful look flickering across his golden eyes.

“I wonder if that Akara girl really is significant.” He mused. “When I mentioned the name Akara to the Saotome representatives, before I left Airai, I half thought they might kill me on the spot. But whether Najya Akara is part of this whole conflict or whether she’s like my pathetic father and one who chooses to live away from the magic, I don’t know. It wouldn’t hurt to be cautious with her, however. The girl I met at my father’s consulate was definitely kin to Dr Akara, and she weaved strange spells that helped preserve her from harm. I suppose we will just have to wait and see what transpires.”

He sighed, shrugging his shoulders.

“And as for Aunt Misaki, whatever ails her, it can only be good for me.” He added. “That she be sent away, and that her life might not be preserved even with this evasive action. Maybe Grandfather is poisoning her after all — that would make an interesting, ironic twist. He could be supporting my insurrection without even knowing about it — but as far as I’m concerned, the further Misaki-obasama is from Jurai and Uncle Haru, the less of a threat she is to me and my claim. Even my strange Uncle can’t conceive a son when his wife is colonies away, and that suits my purpose just fine. Whatever the root cause of all this paranoia, it fits my plans just perfectly. Everything really is coming together nicely… and by the time people realise my true agenda, it will be too late to stand in my way!”

Chapter 3

Chapter Three

It had been a hard journey home.

Princess Aiko let out a heavy sigh of relief, unwinding the thick wrap from around her form and placing it carefully on its hook as she glanced around her chamber, eyes carefully taking in her surroundings as she did so. Since the day when her papers had been stolen, she had never been quite secure leaving her private quarters unattended, but in the nine months since the incident, no action had been taken and nobody had breathed even the slightest hint of a word about Kagato's illegitimacy.

And yet, she was still wary. She knew that enemies could bide their time, and so it was with some measure of relief that she realised nothing had been moved.

"Not that there is much to steal from me, now." She murmured. "And Akito has not responded to my last letter. I wonder about that… whether he has got wind of the risk here or whether he is simply busy or angry at me for some reason. It is hard to say, but maybe it is for the best. He is a busy man and I have a lot to hide. Sometimes a Princess really can't follow her heart… not as much as she'd like to."

"Sister Aiko?"

At the sound of her brother's voice, she wheeled around, hand flying to her chest as she registered the presence of the Crown Prince, concern and anxiety in his deep red eyes.

"You made me jump, Azusa." She said frankly, sitting down on the end of her bed and casting him a quizzical look. "What brings you so far into my chambers? I don't know as people would approve, even if you are my Lord brother."

"I hoped for news of Misaki-san, that's all."

Azusa leant up against the doorframe, eying her pensively. "Haru does not speak to me about it — he avoids the subject of his wife's illness and it troubles me. You went with her to the outpost, Aiko — you must know better than me how fares my sister-in-law."

"Misaki's health is none of your concern, Niichan." Aiko said frankly. "But you needn't worry yourself on Haru's account. I'll make

sure he's all right. The truth is that he's probably been missing the both of us — you're poor company in comparison, with your close affiliation to Father."

"Father." Azusa frowned, his brow creasing in confusion. "I see. So there has been some rift between my brother and the Emperor? That is why Haru will not confide in me?"

"There's nothing to confide, that would be closer to the truth." Aiko said matter-of-factly. "And our Father pays so little attention to Haru and I, I think such a falling out would probably be seen as progress in their relationship, rather than the reverse. Why are you so concerned about Misaki anyway, Azusa? You and she have never been so terribly close, and even though you and Haru have always been friends, I'm surprised that you pay it so much attention. Misaki is unwell and she has left to convalesce, that is all. What the outcome will be, noone yet knows. But constantly reminding him of his wife's absence is not going to help Haru to deal with being on his own, now is it?"

"I suppose not." Azusa sighed. "Aiko, I'm sorry. He will be more than happy to have you back. As you say, I'm a poor substitute."

"So long as you realise it." Aiko's eyes glittered with a hint of her usual mischief, and she offered him a smile. "So what other news do you bring to me, Niichan? Or shall I have to speak to my son, instead, if I want to know the latest court intrigues?"

"Your son has been far too wrapped up with Mikamo Niwase and his science project to pay attention to anything else." Azusa said frankly. "He hasn't been seen at court so often since you went away. Perhaps he also misses you, Aiko-chan — although I have to say his focus on this investigation of his is bordering on the obsessive."

"Perhaps." Aiko looked pensive. "If I could tell him the truth about himself, maybe it would even be better in some ways. He seems so keen on pursuing these scientific goals that I wonder if he'd not have been happier growing up in exile — if I'd found the courage to run from Jurai and start my life elsewhere. I don't know, Azusa. Sometimes I wonder."

"You'd have left Jurai?" Azusa looked shocked, and Aiko nodded.

"Akito suggested it, but I was too frightened. Too young." She said regretfully. "And now we live these lives built on lies. Azusa, I still don't know who it was who raided my belongings and stole my letters to him… although I do believe you, when you say it wasn't you. It still troubles me that someone might be there, waiting for the right time to expose me and my son for what we are. I could live with it falling on

my head, Oniisama, but I couldn't bear what it would do to Kagato. He's always been more comfortable than me in this high-born social whirl, and I don't know… I think it would hurt him, even if he understood that I'd lied."

"Then perhaps you should stop writing to his father, and laying a paper trail." Azusa said softly. Aiko stared at him.

"I haven't heard back from Akito since the last time I wrote, and that was more than seven months ago now." She admitted. "Perhaps he has the same thought. Or maybe he's been reassigned."

"Or married." Azusa suggested gently, and anger flared in Aiko's eyes. She got to her feet, putting her hands on her hips as she shook her head firmly.

"Akito always loved me." She said in low tones. "As I always did him. I married Hotaru because I had to, but he understood that. I've always sworn to him and to myself that I would never take another husband and he promised me there would never be another woman in his life. He has integrity, Azusa. He would never, ever betray me in that way."

"It would not be betrayal, if it kept your secret a secret." Azusa rested a gentle hand on her shoulders. "Besides, little sister, a lot of time has passed since you and he last saw one another. Maybe his feelings are not as strong as yours. After all, you're reminded of him each time you see your son. He has no such reminder."

Aiko's brows knitted together as she fought to control her temper.

"I know Akito. You don't." She murmured. "Unless you've intercepted my mail in some way, of course — in which case, I know the reason he hasn't responded."

"Aiko, you have my word that I would not do such a thing… any more than I would raid your chamber searching for proof of the fact." Azusa said gently. "I am your brother and I love you. Interfering might be the Princely thing to do, but I couldn't do it even so. I wouldn't risk losing your good opinion of me… you and Haru matter more to me than you realise, you know."

Aiko glanced at him for a moment, then she sighed, shaking her head.

"I'm sorry. I'm tense." She admitted. "Akito hasn't replied to me, and I don't know whether to try and find out why or whether I should let it lie. And Misaki is… is not well, and I've left her so far away from everyone she cares about. I suppose I'm taking it out on you, Niichan.

I apologise."

"You're forgiven." Azusa hugged his companion tightly, affection in his gaze. "And I promise, if I hear anything — no matter how fleeting — about an Arian ambassador named Akito Saotome, then you will be the first to know. It might seem less suspicious, after all, if the Crown Prince of Jurai looked into the matter from an official, diplomatic standpoint."

"Yes. It would." Gratitude flooded Aiko's expression and she returned the hug warmly. "Thank you, Oniisama. It would be a great relief — greater than you know."

"Then that's what I'll do. I might have more success with it than I will negotiating with my son, after all."

"Yosho still causes you trouble?" Aiko looked surprised. "He's been back here so long I almost thought him resigned to the situation."

"No, he's not resigned." Azusa bit his lip. "He's formally polite to both me and to Father, and you can't question his manners or his punctuality. He's acting the perfect royal representative, dignified, calm and reasonable. But his eyes betray him, Aiko. I know he still has his heart set on Haruna, just like you still think so fondly of Akito. And there's nothing I can do to resolve the matter for either one of you — I still worry that his youth and inexperience will send him off on a crazy mission. Keeping her whereabouts a secret is not easy, and there will come a time when we have to release Funaho-fune from being grounded on Jurai. Then… I don't know what will happen. And I fear both Father's reaction and the decisions I will have to make."

"I think it's a shame Yosho can't have his head and damn tradition." Aiko said succinctly. "If he were my son, I wouldn't object to a lady like Haruna as a daughter-in-law."

"Nor would I, all things being equal." Azusa said gravely. "But the Council of Jurai would never accept a bastard bride for the heir to Jurai's throne, Aiko. You know it and so do I — that's why you've kept Kagato's true identity such a secret for so long. It would cast a slur not only on their match but on any children they might have. And then there could be war — and that would be catastrophic for this planet as a whole. We've been so peaceful for such a long time… knowing that, I can't give him my blessing. Even though as his father, I sorely want to."

Aiko eyed him keenly.

"I believe you." She said finally. "And I'm sorry for it, too. It must

be harder to be Father's favourite child than to be one of those he keeps in the shadows."

"Sometimes." Azusa admitted ruefully. "And it creates a gulf between even you and I, when the Crown of Jurai is in the balance. Go speak to Haru, sister — I know you can bring him greater comfort than I can at present. And I will visit Tsunami's shrine and pray for Misaki's swift recovery and return to Jurai. Even if Father doesn't care much for you or Haru's feelings, Aiko-chan, I do… never forget that, all right?"

Aiko offered him a slight smile, nodding her head.

"When you are Emperor, life will be very different." She murmured. "And you shouldn't worry so much about things that haven't come to be yet. I think the succession will settle itself, one way or another. And you are young still and strong… you will be King for many years after Father relinquishes his grip on the crown. He's hardly a weak old man himself, come to that — Yosho has many years yet to reconcile himself to becoming Emperor of Jurai, so try not to fret about it. All will work out in the long run… trust me and have faith."

"All right. If you say so." Azusa returned the smile, bowing his head slightly in acknowledgement of her words. "I hope you're right, Aiko. I really hope you're right."

"The Lady Aiko has returned to Jurai."

Washu rested her chin in her hands, casting a glance over her lab results as she made her observation. "I'm sure I saw the Sayuri-fune fly into dock this morning, when I was out and about. Looks like Kagato-dono's mother has come home from her trip away — maybe he'll be less obsessive about the project now he knows that his mother is safe and well, Mikamo-kun."

"He has missed her, but I wouldn't call him a mother's boy." Mikamo looked amused, leaning back against the units as he surveyed her. "I wonder if that means another invite to dinner for everyone… Aiko-hime sure likes to socialise, and I've missed the company of both of you at the table in the last few days."

"We don't always eat in royal company, Mikamo." Washu laughed. "But I won't object, if the invitation comes. I like Lady Aiko. She has a bright wit and a lot of personality… I won't mind at all, if she decides to call on us again."

"I wonder how Lady Misaki is." Najya set down her petrie dish,

biting her lip as she considered. “The rumours are that she might die… do you think so, Mikamo-sensei? I know you have some medical training, way back when. Did you notice anything about her, before she left?”

“Lady Misaki isn’t someone I pay much attention to.” Mikamo admitted. “I hadn’t really been watching, to be honest. But if it’s severe enough that she’s sent away, then it must be a pretty bad complaint. I feel sorry for her. She’s had such poor luck in the last year. I suppose her current infirmity might be related to her miscarriage — it was a nasty business, all told — but perhaps it’s a coincidence. Either way I’m sad for her and for Lord Haru. They’ve had nothing but grief since we came here and it’s terrible.”

“Yeah.” Najya sighed. “It sucks. Juraian medicine is supposed to be top level. If they can’t find a solution to her ailment, it must be bad.”

“Najya, can I ask you something?” Mikamo cast his colleague a sidelong glance, and Washu frowned, noticing the reserved look in her companion’s eyes.

“What’s eating you, Mikamo?” She asked softly. “Something is wrong?”

“I don’t know.” Mikamo pursed his lips. “It depends.”

“I’m confused.” Najya’s brows knitted together. “What do you want to ask me, Niwase-sensei? You look real serious all of a sudden — have I done something wrong with my results or something?”

“No, nothing scientific.” Mikamo bit his lip, hesitating for a moment then lowering his voice.

“Najya, you’re from Airai, right?”

“Yes.” Washu saw a flicker of fear dart across her friend’s expression, then Najya smiled, nodding her head. “What about it? Don’t tell me you’re about to jump on the anti-Arian bandwagon with the rest of civilised society, Professor!”

“No, of course not.” Mikamo shook his head. “I was just curious… you must come into contact with a lot of strange magical forces, mustn’t you?”

“At home? Sure.” Najya looked confused. “Airai is full of different magical cults. Some powerful, some not. But not everyone chooses a magic pathway to follow, Mikamo-sensei. Some choose not to pursue their magical attributes and focus instead on other lifestyle choices. Such as science or politics. Earthly, mundane disciplines that don’t

require invoking witchcraft or casting incantations."

"Why the sudden question, Mikamo?" Washu wondered. "You've known Najya longer than me — why has it suddenly come up now?"

"I guess it's working on these gems." Mikamo sighed, running his fingers through his thick blond hair. "I know they contain a huge amount of magical power, and I suppose coming into such close contact with it — I was curious. That's all. I know Airai have a reputation for all kinds of magic, good and bad. Najya, I hope you don't mind my prying, but I wondered whether or not your family… well… whether you had any… gifts to speak of."

"Me?" Najya's eyes opened wide in surprise, then she laughed. "But I'm a scientist, Professor. You know that. If I could solve all my questions by magic, I'd not be at the Academy, now would I?"

"I guess not." Relief flickered in the depths of Mikamo's eyes. "I'm sorry. I'm not calling you a witch or anything like that. I just realised how little I know about Airai, that's all."

"Something brought this on." Washu's brows knitted together thoughtfully.

"Yes, I admit it did." Mikamo looked rueful. "Najya's name is Akara, and I became aware recently that the Akara are one of the magical cults of Airai… one of the very powerful ones, in fact. That's why I wanted to know, Najya — I hope you're not offended. I mean, for all I know, Akara might be the most common name in the world on your planet — so please don't think me rude for asking."

Najya let out a peal of amused laughter.

"Oh, I think I can forgive your curiosity." She said lightly. "It's true that Akara is one of the Arian clan names, and it's also true that they are very powerful. But I'm no threat to you or to anyone, Mikamo-sensei. I am a scientist, that's all. Maybe I have a distant kinship to the Akara clan, but if so, it is very distant. As I said, not all choose to live their life through magic."

"Who was talking about Airai, Mikamo?" Washu asked softly. "It seems a random topic of conversation."

"Kagato, in reference to his mother's love of Arian imports." Mikamo said with a shrug. "Obviously Princess Aiko is acquainted with Arian culture far more than you or I are, Washu-chan. The name came up, and I wondered. That's all."

"Well, now you know." Najya shrugged her shoulders. "And we can

get back to the matter at hand — dealing with real magical crystals and real power potential."

She winked at him, then turned on her heel, heading off across the lab to retrieve the equipment that she wanted. Washu watched her go, a frown touching her features as she glanced over Najya's slim, delicate form. For a moment, as Mikamo had aired his suspicions, she had almost sensed something flickering deep within her roommate's soul… but now it was no longer there, and Washu sighed, wondering if she had imagined it.

"After all, maybe *I'm* working too hard, too." She muttered. "And I shouldn't be suspicious of Najya, who's been nothing but a friend to both Mikamo and I since I came here. I've not told her the truth about my magic either, and so even if she is linked to the Akara, I should give her the benefit of the doubt. It might well be that, like me, she turned her back on it and suppresses the magic inside of her. Either way, she is my friend and I won't pursue it. It's not my business, after all, what kind of background my colleagues come from."

"Washu? Something on your mind?" Mikamo's voice broke through her musing, and she glanced up, offering him a smile.

"Nothing but the usual random formulae." She said lightly. "And whether or not I can convince you to invite me back to your chamber this evening, instead of going to mine…"

"Ah." Mikamo's blue eyes softened with affection. "I guess we'll see. It's not an impossibility."

He winked at her, then turned, scooping up his notes from the unit and casting a cursitory glance over them. As he did so, the sleeve of his gown caught the edge of the sensitive equipment and with a yell, Washu darted forwards, grabbing the expensive microscopic analyser before it could tumble to the floor. Two or three nearby chemical vessels were not so fortunate, and as they collided with the slick hard surface of the floor, the liquids they contained bubbled and hissed together, sending acrid smoke upwards as they reacted. Mikamo let out an exclamation, pulling Washu back from the mess as he instucted one of the nearby lab hands to run for protective clothing and a strong cleaning solution, and as Washu raised her gaze to his, she could see the dismay in his expression.

"You're white as a ghost, Mikamo, and you're shaking." She whispered. "It was just an accident. Don't look like that."

"A little closer and it would have burned right through your skin." Mikamo murmured, still staring at the mess on the floor. "I can't

believe I'd be so careless… Washu, I'm sorry. I didn't…"

"It's all right." Washu assured him hurriedly. "I'm not hurt. And even if it had splashed me, I'm sure I'd have survived it. My skin is pretty strong. Don't fret."

Mikamo bit his lip, shaking his head slowly.

"I just don't understand it." He murmured, more to himself than to his companion. Then, as the lab hand returned, he turned his attention to giving further safety instructions, sending scientists and technicians hurrying around the lab following his orders as the minor crisis was brought under control.

Washu stood back against the wall, eying her fiance pensively. He was white as a ghost, his eyes mere shadows in his face, and there was a look in them that she had scarcely seen there before.

"Fear." She murmured. "Of what, though? Of me being hurt? Or something else? What is wrong with him at the moment? I wish I knew if it was my fault. But he won't admit that there's a problem, and the more time goes on, the clearer it becomes to me that there is one. It's such a pain!"

She cast a casual glance around the lab, biting her lip as she realised something else. Frowning, she pushed through the melee of lab staff towards the bench where Najya had been working, picking up the petri dish absently as she glanced at its contents.

"And now where's Najya gone?" She wondered aloud. "We're in lab till six at the earliest. It's only just past four. Where has she disappeared to… and why? What the hell is going on — why are people I care about suddenly acting oddly? Has it got something to do with what Mikamo asked her… about her roots on Airai?"

She frowned, casting a hesitant glance back at the Project Leader, then making up her mind. Setting down the petri dish, she crossed the floor to the door, telling a nearby colleague as she went that if Mikamo asked, she'd gone to wash her hands clean of any residual chemical spillage, just in case. Then she hurried down the hallway, glancing each way as she searched for any sign of her roommate.

Najya was not in the bathrooms of the annexe, and as Washu teleported herself into their sleeping quarters, she realised that her friend wasn't there either. Nothing in the chamber seemed out of place, and after a moment's glance at Najya's private belongings, Washu decided against rifling through them.

"She's done nothing to merit my suspicion. If she left the lab, it may

have been for some trivial reason. Maybe she needed to get samples, or perhaps she went to get something, to help clean up the spill." She murmured. "But I can't shake the feeling she took advantage of the chaos to do something else. Otherwise, why didn't she come see whether Mikamo and I were all right? That seems strange — at odds with the Najya Akara I thought I knew. I guess maybe I'm wondering if I do know her — but that's crazy. Washu, you're being paranoid. Your Kii sight would have picked it up, if Najya was an enemy. Which means she might be in trouble, as opposed to anything else. I suppose it wouldn't hurt to just have another look around — just in case."

She glanced around her to ensure she was definitely alone, then she closed her eyes, transferring herself across the landscape to the Royal Palace of Jurai. Re-materialising in a secluded alcove, she peered out across the grass, her eyes widening in surprise as she registered her colleague's presence no more than twenty feet away. Najya had her back to her companion, but even from that angle Washu could tell that something was amiss, for the scientist stood rigidly erect, her gaze fixed on something further in the distance. As her hair fluttered in the breeze, Washu realised with a jolt that the thick silver hair that Najya had so easily dismissed glittered with a strange light in Jurai's sun, and she pursed her lip, wondering what it meant.

"Magic? No magic? And what's got her so upset?" She wondered, crossing the grass slowly to where her companion stood. "Well, I guess we'll soon see, won't we?"

Najya did not hear her approach, and as Washu rested a hand on her shoulder she let out an exclamation, swinging around in alarm. As she met her roommate's curious green eyes, relief flooded through her and she grasped her companion by the arms, shaking her head.

"You scared the life out of me!" She exclaimed.

"You're playing hooky." Washu said bluntly. "What's up, Najya? Why are you here?"

Najya blushed, looking discomfitted as she did so.

"That stuff Mikamo spilt… the smell makes me nauseous." She admitted sheepishly. "I had to get out of there… I needed air. I thought I'd walk for a while — I'll explain to Mikamo-sensei later, if he's cross with me. I'm sorry — did he send you all this way to find me?"

"No… I came of my own accord, because I was concerned about you." Washu admitted. "But why come to the palace? Surely there's plenty of land outside the lab?"

“Yes, but I thought I might throw up.” Najya admitted. “And well, would you like to be taking samples or doing experiments in soil which was… er…”

She trailed off, and Washu laughed, shaking her head slowly.

“I see your point.” She acknowledged. “And now? Are you all right?”

Najya’s eyes flickered with consternation, and she shook her head, turning her gaze back towards the horizon.

“I wish I was.” She murmured. “But I suppose there’s little I can do about it.”

“Najya?” Washu frowned, following her friend’s gaze. As she did so, she made out the looming shadow of a spaceship, and, if she squinted, she was aware of figures against it, dressed in the robes of one of Jurai’s many colonies as they were greeted by a palace knight. She looked confused.

“I don’t understand.” She said quietly. “What do you mean? Who are they?”

“You see them?” Najya looked surprised. Washu nodded.

“Yes. Two people — it looks like a man and a girl.” She agreed. “What about them? Do you know them?”

Najya sighed, rubbing her temples.

“Masaru Saotome.” She murmured. “And his daughter, Ramia. Yes, you could say we’ve made their acquaintance a few times… although it’s been a while since I saw them face to face. The last time I exchanged words with Masaru was when I was still a girl… at my Uncle’s passing. Ramia was little more than a baby.”

“So what’s the problem?” Washu’s eyes narrowed. “You don’t want them to see you? But why not?”

“I expect they know I’m here. It might be why they’ve come.” Najya bit her lip. “Or it might not. They’re dressed as Juraian colonists, Washu, but that’s not the truth. They’re Saotome — members of Airai’s darkest and most evil mage-cult. Masaru is the head of the Saotome family — and a truly wicked man. I said I last saw him when my Uncle passed on — well, Masaru Saotome was the one who took his life.”

“Najya!” Washu’s eyes opened wide in dismay. Najya spread her hands.

“Dark mages like to make victims.” She said bitterly. “And that’s how they treat our planet. It’s why I’m so loath to even talk about my roots. I’m from Airai, but I’m not a demon. And people like them… on Jurai… it can’t be a good thing. The reputation my people already have is black enough, thanks to the Saotome clan.”

“Why would they come after you, Najya-chan?”

“Perhaps they haven’t.” Najya admitted. “Either way, I’m not going to give them cause to notice me. They’re unexpected, that’s all. And their attire… they wish to fool Jurai’s court into believing they are friends.”

“Then we should report this to someone.” Washu said thoughtfully. “Someone who can do something about it.”

“Like who?” Najya looked helpless. “Prince Kagato? Would he listen to one Arian scientist?”

“No, not Kagato-dono.” Washu shook her head firmly. “But there must be someone we can speak to. If you’re afraid they really mean danger.”

Najya buried her head in her hands, shaking her head.

“I will not become involved in this.” She murmured. “I can’t defend myself against Masaru Saotome. When my family learnt I was going to Jurai, my father told me that I must make sure to leave the planet again alive. He and my mother, they dote on my sister Aya and I. We mean the world to them. And I know what he would say to me, now. Keep your head down, Najya, and don’t invite trouble. Masaru is a truly dangerous man — and only another true mage is anything like a match for him in a battle of magic.”

“So…?” Washu prompted.

“So we go back to the lab, and I’d appreciate it if you wouldn’t mention this to anyone. Mikamo especially.” Najya sighed. “Because I don’t want him to turn against me because I’m Arian… and if he connects me to these people, he surely will. So will everyone… it’s how it works.”

“Not me.” Washu said firmly, linking her arm in her friends. “I’m a Kii, remember? I’m already hated, feared and loathed.”

A faint smile touched Najya’s features at this, and she nodded, but Washu saw that the consternation had not left her ruby gaze.

“Thank you.” She said gratefully. “I’m glad to have come here at least to have met you, Washu-chan.”

“Likewise.” Washu said amiably. “So we’ll go back to work and I won’t tell Mikamo you skipped out if you don’t tell him I did. He has enough on his mind as it is — it’s not like him to destroy lab equipment. Maybe I shouldn’t go to his room tonight, after all.”

“I think that might make him all the more distracted.” Najya said playfully. “He’s only a man, he’s not superhuman. Maybe he’s suffering withdrawal.”

“Najya.” Washu pinkened, and Najya laughed.

“You know I’ll cover for you, if you’re not in our room and someone calls by.” She said with a careless flick of her hands. “So put the poor man out of his misery… I’m sure all that’s wrong with him is a little too much work and a little too little play.”

“Well, maybe.” Washu pursed her lips. “All right. Maybe you’re right. I’ll speak to him about it later. After all, well, we are here on Kagato-dono’s request, but that doesn’t mean that we can’t branch out and spread our wings a little while we’re here.”

“Exactly.” Najya dimpled. “We all have our own special projects, after all.”

She winked at her companion, and Washu was relieved to see some colour returning to her friend’s pale features as they crossed the landscape towards the research institute. Still, the arrival of the two strangers lingered in her mind and she frowned, resolving to pursue the matter further later on.

“After all, if they’re here for no good reason, then someone should know.” She murmured. “But just because Najya doesn’t like them… Airai is full of warring factions, and I couldn’t really get a look at them from where we were standing. It might just be that her uncle crossed paths with Najya’s family and that there’s blame on both sides. I’d do better not to jump into something I don’t understand. Lady Aiko deals with Airai regularly, after all. We know that. And I don’t want to upset Prince Kagato’s family any more than I have to. No, for now, I’ll keep quiet. And just listen and watch to see what happens. After all, if something is amiss, I’m sure I’ll pick up on it soon enough.”

Chapter 4

Chapter Four

"Well, Prince Kagato. So we meet again."

The tall, distinguished gentleman stepped through the arched doorway of Kagato's private study, bowing his head briefly to acknowledge his host before casting a casual, disinterested glance around at his surroundings. "I must admit, to get a direct invitation to Jurai almost smacks of a veiled threat. Such antics usually mean an ambush — so far I've been surprised and a little disappointed that you've not provided a welcome party of that nature."

"You like to fight your contacts, Lord Masaru?"

Kagato inclined his head slightly in amusement, gesturing to his guests to make themselves comfortable as he settled himself in a corner chair. "Tessei, see to it that our visitors have refreshments, and quickly."

Masaru turned his head, his eyes glittering thoughtfully as he saw the knight withdraw, shutting the door behind him. Then he frowned.

"You trust in that man's motives? He seems a very easily bought kind of manservant to employ." He said flatly. "I would not put faith in his loyalty."

"I don't put faith in anyone's loyalty. Not if I have to buy their obedience with promises and threats." Kagato said simply. "Lord Masaru, I'm grateful for your coming, although I'm surprised that you did. If you expected such a hostile welcome, why take the risk at all?"

"To further show Jurai why it is they fear our magic." Masaru smiled, a cold, chilling smile, revealing perfect white teeth. Kagato eyed him for a moment, taking in his impeccable appearance, and despite himself, he felt both awed and repulsed by the man's presence. Masaru appeared youthful, although the Prince already knew that he was older than his Uncle Azusa, and his thick mahogany hair was pulled back from his face in a long braid, fastened at the end with a simple bronze clasp. He was dressed in simple robes, typical of one of Jurai's many colony planets, but at the throat of his shirt Kagato was aware of a string of beads, each one carved with a different symbol, and his hands bore many rings marked with the same sacred signs. Somehow, although he appeared to be just another treating colonial

noble, Masaru Saotome had an aura which made him stand apart from anyone else the Prince had ever met. His skin glistened and glowed with the surging magic that lived within, and Kagato could almost feel the darkness of his heart, even as he sat across the room from his companion. His heart skipped a beat. Masaru was a dangerous man to ally with, but an even more forbidding one to cross.

At his side, silent but not cowed by the presence of Juraian royalty was a young girl, maybe twelve or thirteen summers, her wavy ruby hair clasped back at the nape of her neck with a velvet covered butterfly-clasp. She too dressed simply, and her expression was perfectly demure, the picture of a respectful child in the presence of her betters. And yet, as Kagato ran his gaze over her demeanour, he could see the zest and ambition sparkling in her eyes. She was no fool, he realised. Young as she was, Masaru's daughter was already seeing first hand the manipulative hand of power, and would one day be a formidable force in her own right.

Masaru caught his glance, and smiled again.

"Ramia is interested in Jurai." He said, by way of explanation. "So I said she could come with me… I hope you don't mind. I have a weakness for indulging my daughter, Kagato-dono."

"I very much doubt it's a weakness, Lord Masaru." Kagato said astutely. "If it means she learns to understand her enemies and her allies before she reaches adulthood."

"Pleased to meet you, Prince Kagato." Ramia spoke very properly in precise, accented Galactic Tongue, holding out her hand in an Arian greeting as she offered him a deceptively innocent smile. "Thank you for your kind hospitality towards my father and I."

"Yes, of course." Kagato sat back in his chair, reciprocating the gesture with a clumsy imitation of his own. "You're most welcome, Ramia-sama. You and your father both, especially if you bring news I want to hear."

"Well, that depends very much on you." Masaru's eyes narrowed to almost slits as he surveyed the Prince, and Kagato hesitated, unsure as to the man's motives. "And on what kind of offer you can make to us. As you probably realise, the Saotome are powerful. Very powerful. You claim kinship to us, and you have the gold eyes to back up your assertion. But you are a Prince of Jurai, our long-sworn enemies in all things. How can you be so certain you are family to Ramia and I?"

Kagato paused, as there was a knock at the door, and it swung back, revealing a mutinous Tessei and a tray of drinks. The knight set

them down on Kagato's desk with ill grace, withdrawing from the room after making a cursitory bow to his master, and as the door clicked shut behind them, Masaru let out a chuckle of amusement.

"Surly and insolent. You do know how to choose them, on Jurai." He murmured. "Is he the best you have available?"

"No, but for now he will do. He's dispensible, and he knows it, so he strives to make himself otherwise." Kagato said comfortably. "I wield a great amount of power behind the scenes, you know. A lot more than my Grandfather would like to admit. Tessei is his man by blood oath, but mine by deed. And that is how I like it — I know all of the Emperor's affairs without having to stir from my own quarters. It suits me well."

"Then you seek the throne of Jurai." Masaru frowned. "That is your intention?"

"You know it is." Kagato agreed. "I want to be Emperor of this world. I have been through enough to deserve it, and I will not give up until I succeed. No matter what it takes."

"And then?"

"And then there will be benefits for your people, too. Strength to fight your rivals, provided by Jurai. Your enemies are mine, after all, if we are kin."

"You think we need your help, Lord Kagato?" Masaru asked, his voice dangerously low. Kagato shrugged, trying to hide his own trepidation at the darkness in the man's amber eyes.

"You told me yourself that you'd spent the good part of the last few centuries fighting against the Akara." He said nonchalantly. "Yet not beating them conclusively. You cancel one another out, but with the huge resources at Jurai's disposal, there must be something that could snuff out their people once and for all. You could have such a numerical advantage, if you had the kind of allies that Jurai's Empire could provide."

"The Akara." Masaru's words dripped with hate, and Kagato nodded.

"Yes. Now you see that I can benefit you, too." He agreed lightly.

"According to my brother's information, you shield an Akara already on this planet of yours." Masaru snapped. "And from the scent of their vile magic about this place, I know he spoke the truth. Why should I believe your loyalties are to the Saotome? Are you treating

with both families, hoping to spar us against one another for your own ends?"

"Not at all." Kagato shook his head. "Najya Akara is a member of a friend's research team. She will be leaving Jurai when the project ends. I had no knowledge of her connections until I mentioned the name to your brother, and…"

"*Najya* Akara?" Kagato faltered, as Masaru's eyes opened wide, interest flickering in their depths. "You did say *Najya* Akara?"

"Yes." Kagato frowned. "What of her? Does it matter what her name is? I would have thought that to you all Akara were the same — don't you hate them all?"

"Each and every one." Masaru nodded, a predatorial expression crossing his features. "But *that* one… that one in particular. She has been absent from Airai for some years, and we have been unable to penetrate her safe haven at the Science Academy to deal with her conclusively. But if you could arrange for the… *disappearance* of Najya Akara, then I would be assured of your loyalty to our cause. If you can end her life, Kagato-dono, I can promise you the support of the Saotome."

"Right now?" Kagato stared. "You must be mad."

"So you aren't committed to our aims!"

"Not that at all." Kagato shook his head. "Listen, Masaru. This is the way things work on Jurai. Maybe in your world, slaying people at random works for you. It might not be such an important matter, if you kill someone, when everyone fears you anyway. But I'm trying to become Emperor. The Science Academy has far-reaching safe-conduct assurances for all of its people. Killing a Galaxy protected scientist not only looks bad on your record, but also starts raising questions. Flags. Paper trails as to why. For all anyone here knows, Najya Akara is nothing more than another scientific investigator. She has betrayed her true roots to noone — if she is indeed one of the magical Akara clan you keep talking about, and her name is not coincidence."

Masaru clenched his fists, banging them down on the top of Kagato's desk and sending splashes of hot tea spilling over the edges of the carved mugs.

"Do not speak so casually of things you barely understand." He said threateningly, on his feet as he glared at the startled prince. "*All* Akara are related to the same clan. Whatever lies she's woven to gain access here, she is one of them. She is the daughter of the Akara mage Yasuo

— my equivalent among their wretched family. And she is his eldest child. When he passes on, Najya will inherit his mage-magic, just as Ramia will one day inherit mine. You see now why I keep my daughter close, Kagato. I can keep her safe, and teach her at the same time. My rival Yasuo is not so wise. He's let Najya fly far from the nest, believing that she's safer away from Airai than she is on the surface. Or so I thought — but if she's here, perhaps she's doing more than just hiding from my wrath. I want the woman dead, Kagato. I want her blood spilled and her body cooling!"

"I didn't say I wouldn't kill her." Kagato said impatiently. "But you must realise that I can't just run up to her with a knife and stab her through the heart. Najya is Arian. To kill an Arian on my planet, even if I took all of the subtle, careful precautions that anyone with sense would take, would incite political turmoil. I do not want to draw attention to myself or to you… and if it was discovered that this Najya girl is the daughter of a powerful clan, it would make things more complicated. Better that she should complete her work here, and then disappear as she leaves… an accident in space. Pirates are numerous… anything might befall her there, away from the safe shores of Jurai."

Masaru's eyes narrowed as he contemplated this.

"I have your word that the Akara heiress will die?" He asked softly. Kagato nodded.

"In blood, if you want." He said flippantly, and Masaru nodded.

"That will suit me very nicely, Prince of Jurai." He agreed quietly. "Ramia, if you please."

Much to Kagato's surprise, the young girl nodded her head, obediently slipping a dainty finger into the folds of her skirt and producing a sharp blade, the hilt ornately carved with unfamiliar symbols. Carefully and reverently she set it down on the desk, eying the Prince expectantly.

"Your blood, Prince Kagato." Masaru said smoothly. "The blade is hexed. A promise made by its cut must be kept, or else ill fortune will fall on the head of the one who breaks the bond. Your blood will seal the agreement. Then, and only then, will I discuss the matter of Saotome mage-magic with you, and decide whether you are truly one of us."

Kagato hesitated for a moment, then he picked up the blade, feeling a faint buzz shoot through his fingers as he did so. Holding his fingers out before him, he pursed his lips, drawing the tip of the knife across the top of his index finger until blood spilled out across the metal,

sizzling as it made contact with the bright steel. Masaru nodded approvingly, holding out his hand for the knife. Kagato relinquished it to him, watching in horrified fascination as the mage touched his own finger to the streak of blood, glancing at it and then raising it to his lips.

"You *are* a Saotome." He murmured, a slow smile crossing his lips. "You have the taste of one. You truly are of my kin, Kagato-sama."

"What did you just do?" Kagato stared. "You people *drink* blood?"

"No, not at all." Masaru shook his head. "But the best way to test a mage's true strength is to taste his blood-magic. You have great potential, Prince of two planets. Your Jurai power bubbles and simmers inside of you. With the added bonus of the Saotome strength, you could indeed realise your dream of ruling over Jurai. But I'm curious. Your blood has the taint of illegitimacy… how is it that you hold such a privileged position at court here? Legitimacy matters nothing to us or our people. Blood is all that matters. But on Jurai…"

"It is a well kept secret, and I will kill to keep it so." Kagato said darkly. Masaru looked startled for a moment, then he laughed, slicing across his own hand with the blade before returning the weapon to his daughter's care. The young girl took the knife in her dainty, slim fingers, carefully wiping it clean as if polishing a pair of spectacles, then she offered the Prince a dazzling smile, replacing it in the scabbard that hung hidden by the thick folds of her dress.

"Indeed." Masaru said, and Kagato could hear the soft approval in his tone. "That is what I like to hear. And the more you do, the more Tsunami's magic will become bonded to the darker side of your nature, Prince of Jurai. The more lives you extinguish, the darker your blade will become, until nothing can stand in the way of your power and your determination."

"Then we have much to discuss." The Prince said. "Because I know the magic runs through me. It must do. My father was of your people, and my mother is of Jurai. I have already learnt to stir it within me, but I lack the skill and know-how to master it. There is noone here who can instruct me in the ways of such precious magic. I feel the power it can offer me, but I am frustrated in how to take it further. To dominate this planet, my magic must match — no, it must overwhelm the others who claim this throne through Tsunami's bloodline. My Grandfather. My Uncle. My cousin, Yosho. All of these."

"Yes, I see." Masaru rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "You have many competitors for Jurai's throne, don't you?"

“I do.” Kagato sighed. “And it makes life complicated. Grandfather is old and annoying, but he refuses to die. Uncle Azusa lacks the clinical edge to truly govern in the right vein. My cousin is a lovesick fool. And I, the forgotten Prince… well, I have much to do behind the scenes. But I wish to emerge from the shadows in time. I want this world for my own, Masaru-dono. And I will do whatever it takes to get there.”

“You would slay your own blood, Kagato-sama?” Ramia asked softly at this point, her amber eyes fixed on his face as she awaited his answer. Kagato nodded his head grimly.

“I already have.” He agreed quietly. “My Aunt’s unborn infant stilled in her womb, thanks to my machinations. And my blood father — he too lies dead at the end of my sword.”

“Really?” Masaru’s eyes narrowed. “You *slew* a Saotome?”

“He was not like you. He had no magic to protect him.” Kagato said dismissively. “He was a traitor to your clan, Masaru. He was in close contact with the Akara girl’s sister. I saw for myself how far he had tried to remove himself from his roots. His name was Akito — but it doesn’t matter now. Noone will ever find his body. I have seen to that. He has just disappeared.”

“Akito was a cousin of mine. His father was my Uncle, and brother to my own father.” Masaru said softly. “This doesn’t concern you, that you admit so freely to killing one of our own?”

“He was in my way.” Kagato’s eyes hardened, and he met Masaru’s gaze evenly. “So I removed him.”

Ramia let out a delighted laugh at this, startling both men, and Masaru turned, sending his daughter a quizzical look.

“Ramia?”

“You always said how much you’d like to find someone to destroy Cousin Akito’s bloodline.” Ramia folded her hands in her lap, clearly amused by the topic of murder and family betrayal. “Now you’re going to befriend them, Father. And Akito-san can no longer disgrace our family, can he, if Lord Kagato has destroyed him? He is no longer an embarrassment. He is gone. Aren’t you happy?”

Masaru started, then he laughed again.

“Yes, I suppose I am.” He acknowledged, touching Ramia’s cheek with something that verged on affection, and Kagato felt relief course through him. “My daughter speaks true, Prince Kagato. I hated my

Uncle's betrayal and I would have given much to see the line eradicated once and for all. But you seem determined to bring it round full circle, and return your loyalties to the heart of the clan. So as Ramia says, all is well. We do not betray one another, you must know this. But in this case, the first betrayal was his. Akito is no loss to the house of Saotome."

"And he's no loss to me either, now that noone can trace my heritage back to him." Kagato said frankly. "Dead men, I find, speak less than live ones."

"That's an adage worth remembering." Masaru said cryptically, getting to his feet and gesturing for his daughter to follow suit. "Very well. I will accept your request, and I will help you to wake and master the darkness within you. You have given me your loyalty as a true member of my family, and I will honour that bond. You will always have safe passage with our people, so long as you do not betray that pact."

"I will not renege on anything I've promised you." Kagato rose also, bowing his head towards the mage and then his heiress. "To you and the lady Ramia, a safe stay on Jurai and a secure one, too."

"In the guise of noble visitors, noone will know that we are really from Airai." Masaru said simply. "I have never visited Jurai before, and I do not fear your people's magic as much as some might. The Akara girl, she will be taken care of by your word. And if she has kept her true nature a secret, it will do her no good to reveal ours, either. After all, on Jurai, all Arians are judged alike."

"True." Kagato's lips twisted into a humourless smile. "As are all bastard born Princes. So in that we have something in common — and a reason to keep all of each other's secrets."

"Indeed." Masaru held out his hand, clasping Kagato's tightly in his cool, secure grip. "Then till tomorrow, Prince Kagato. We have much to do, if you are to succeed in bringing Arian blood to the throne of Jurai!"

———

"So I was right."

Najya slipped back into the alcove of the hallway, biting her lip hard enough to taste blood as she contemplated all that she had overheard. "The worst of my fears are realised. Masaru isn't here by coincidence. He knows that Kagato is a Saotome, and that he's bastard born. But he also knows I'm here, and now Kagato knows who I am,

also. I must tread all the more carefully. Should I leave Jurai altogether? But that would ruin everything. No, Father would say to stay… and to see what I can learn. At least this way I can send warning to Airai. At least I can tell them what's happening, and that our hopes for peace with Prince Kagato look to be at great risk."

She sighed, clenching her fists tightly as she hazed out of view, re-materialising in the spacious bedroom that she shared with Washu and sinking down onto her bed with a heavy sigh. Absently she unwound the heavy headscarf from her thick mane of silky hair, watching her reflection in the mirror pool as it cascaded like silver rain across her shoulders and down her back. Bright ruby eyes glittered confusion and consternation back at her in the ripples of the water, and she sighed, running an absent hand through the crystal clear liquid to disperse the image she saw.

"Eyes red enough to reflect the blood of our ancestors, spilled by Saotome in times long past." She murmured. "And so it continues."

"Najya, is that you?"

The door of the en-suite bathroom made her jump and she swung around to face her room-mate, dressed in her robe as she rubbed her wild red hair dry with a thick cream towel. At the sight of her expression, Washu frowned, lowering the towel and absently folding it over her arm as she crossed the chamber towards her friend.

"What's wrong?" She asked softly. "You look worried. Did something happen?"

"No, I'm fine." Najya forced a smile.

"Those people… are they still here?"

"Yes." Najya forced herself to meet Washu's gaze. "But I… I think I probably overreacted. There… there's no reason for them to come here after me… you were right. It's stupid. I'm just… remembering my uncle and being paranoid. That's all."

Washu's eyes narrowed, and she shook her head.

"You're lying to me." She said flatly. "And you're all over the place. I'm not that easy to fool, Najya. If something is on your mind, you can tell me."

"Don't pretend you tell me all your problems, Washu." Najya sighed, shaking her head. "It's nothing. Really. I'm all right."

Washu opened her mouth to protest, then she hesitated, shaking her head slowly.

“Fine. If that’s how you feel.” She said finally. “I’m going to Mikamo’s room. If you need me, you know where I am — but try not to give yourself nightmares. Even if you can lie to me, it’s harder to lie to yourself.”

With that she disappeared back into the bathroom, shutting the door with a firm click behind her, and Najya groaned, burying her head in her hands.

“I wish I knew if I could trust Washu as much as I want to.” She murmured, a troubled expression in her ruby eyes. “I feel like I can, but then I remember… I remember that she’s Kii. And… and I wonder what that means, really. I may be keeping secrets, but so is she. And unless I can figure out why, I don’t suppose I’ll be able to trust her with mine. It’s a stalemate and it doesn’t make it easier… but I know the Kii have a volatile track record. I know they had a Priestess who went crazy. Since I’ve been here, I’ve learnt more and more about the Kii. And most of all, how that planet has truly been dead a long, long time. And yet Washu calls herself Kii, not a mixed breed of Kii and Jurai. I wish I could work out what the truth was. I could use an ally, but I guess I’m on my own.”

She frowned, reaching beneath her pillow for the compact communication device, and fingering it gently.

“But if Washu is with Mikamo tonight, I can call home and tell them what I’ve learnt.” She reasoned. “And that’s something, at least. That the Akara should be on standby, that Kagato is a true Saotome, and that Masaru and Ramia have similar aspirations to ours about the future of Airian power!”

The night was drawing in, thick and choking as it sealed itself around Mikamo’s heart. He choked, gasping for breath as he ran through the blackness, his eyes darting wildly around him for any sign of help or shelter, but there was nothing. A black shape flitted across the moon, and the eerie call of a hunting owl sent new terror rushing down his spine.

Wherever he ran, he knew, he could not escape their glare.

Behind him, the glitter of red crystals spread like fingers of blood through the darkness, and as lightning pierced the sky overhead, Mikamo was aware of rain falling down onto his skin, soaking through his clothing and causing him to shiver as a bitter wind shot through his soul. A second flash of light illuminated the sky and with a jolt of horror he was aware of redness covering his hands, the sickly stench of blood assailing his nostrils as he gazed at his fingers, aghast.

“Mikamo?”

The voice echoed out of the shadows, and Mikamo struggled to place it, focusing his panicked thoughts on the familiar, gentle tones of one he had so long called a friend. As he stumbled forwards, he was aware of Kagato standing beneath the branches of Tsunami’s Tree of Life, but as he drew closer, he realised that the ends of Tsunami-no-ki’s branches were twisted and blackened, the leaves dead and dying as they fluttered soundlessly to the ground. He faltered, staring at his friend in alarm, and Kagato smiled, holding out his hands to his friend.

“I rely on you, Mikamo.” He whispered. “Such it will all be, if you cannot unlock the magic of those gems.”

“But the blood — Kagato, the blood!” Mikamo held up his hands, his words hoarse with fear as he struggled to make his friend understand. “Can’t you see it? The darkness is all around us!”

“Trust in me, old friend, and together we will succeed in what we set out to do.” Kagato grasped him firmly around the wrist, offering him another smile even as Mikamo saw the sheen of death flicker over his friend’s features. “Before it is too late, Mikamo — I need you!”

“No!”

Mikamo sat bolt upright in bed, breathing heavily as he struggled to bring himself out of his terrified state. It had been a dream, he realised, rubbing his temples absently as he fought to gather his composure. Another dream — but what did they all mean? And why was he so tormented, when at first he had slept so soundly on Jurai?

“Mikamo?”

A sleepy voice at his elbow made him turn, biting his lip as he met Washu’s drowsy gaze with a troubled one of his own. His fiancée stifled a yawn, dragging herself into a sitting position as she reached across to fumble for the bedside light switch. A soft glow spread out across the room, and despite himself, Mikamo felt slightly comforted. He was safe in his chamber, the woman he loved at his side. He had nothing to fear from dreams.

“Why are you awake?” Washu eyed him quizzically, soft concern in her expression. “Mikamo-kun, you’re shaking! And drenched with sweat — what happened? Did you have another nightmare? Another bad dream?”

“It’s nothing, Washu. I just work far too hard, that’s all.” Mikamo groaned, flopping back on his pillows. “Nothing else. Go back to sleep. It’s all right.”

“No, it isn’t all right.” Washu shook her head. “And I’m sick of people telling me that it is. You love me, or so you say. Why then don’t you trust me with the things that are on your mind? Some use it will be us being married if you can’t even share with me your fears. After all, haven’t I shared mine with you, time and time again? You’re the only one I trust, Mikamo — will you not show me the same loyalty?”

“Oh, Washu…” Mikamo rolled over to face her, touching her cheek gently as he did so. “I’m not trying to hide things from you. And I do trust you. I just… it’s a dream. That’s all. Probably nothing at all. And I don’t want to worry you with trivial unimportant things. Dreams go away. They can’t hurt you.”

“Can’t they?” Washu murmured. She reached across to run her fingers through his sweat-damp hair, frowning as she did so. “Then why are you so on edge, my love? You never used to wake in the night screaming out in fear. And even now, even though you say it was just a dream — Mikamo, I can see your fear. It’s raw inside of you. Please… even if you think it stupid, tell me what was in the dream. You have my word that I won’t betray it to anyone… but I’ll worry more if I don’t understand.”

Mikamo bit his lip, then he shrugged his shoulders.

“I don’t know what good it will do.”

“Perhaps it’ll put your mind at rest, as well as mine.” Washu reasoned. “My Father claimed that it was so — that sharing a dream exorcised its evil from within you.”

“I didn’t think you followed such superstitious ideas.”

“I don’t, but in this case, I believe he was right.” Washu told him gently. “A lot of my fears have been put to rest since I shared so much of them with you, after all.”

“I suppose so.” Mikamo’s blue eyes became tender as he looked at her, taking in her appearance beneath the dim glow of the lamp. Her thick red hair flowed over her shoulders, loose and unhindered for once and giving her the appearance of the Priestess she had chosen not to be. Life and intelligence flickered in her green eyes, and her cheeky, up-turned nose gave her a look of perpetual youth, even when — like now — something was clearly on her mind. He bent to kiss her on the forehead, then he nodded his head.

“All right.” He agreed softly. “I’ll try.”

“Good choice.” Faint amusement crossed Washu’s face. “My next

resort would have been the serum, so you made the right decision."

"I know you wouldn't." Mikamo was unphased. "Besides, I have your samples of serum now. You don't need to threaten me, Washu. I'll come clean. Although what good it will do, I don't know."

"Is it the same dream as you've had before?" Washu settled herself more comfortably, eying him expectantly as she did so, and Mikamo nodded slowly, pulling himself upright and leaning against the hard wood of the bedhead as he considered.

"More or less." He agreed. "It's hard to explain. I'm running through the forest — I think it must be the Royal Forest, although how I know that is beyond me, since I've never been so deep inside Jurai's sacred territory. It's dark and there's something frightening me, but it's hard to know what it is. There's lightning and it rains, but when I see the rain, it's not water that's staining my hands and my clothes. It's blood. And…"

He faltered, rubbing his chin.

"This will sound stupid, but I think it's the gems." He murmured. "Chasing me. There's eerie red light, reaching out for me, and I'm trying so hard to escape it. And then I see Kagato, at Tsunami's tree. He's half dead, Washu. As if something I've done has begun to kill him… him and the tree, too. The blood on my hands… but it probably means nothing. Why am I so riled up, if it's just in my imagination?"

Washu eyed him for a moment, then she slipped an arm around his shoulders, hugging him to her tightly.

"Anyone who saw those things would be upset." She murmured. "And dreams, I've found, do usually mean something."

"But this one?" Mikamo looked helpless. "I don't understand what. I'm doing all of this to help Kagato, not to kill him! To preserve his life and his safety, not…"

He faltered, and Washu's eyes narrowed, her grasp on him tightening.

"To preserve his life?" She echoed softly. "What does that mean? I thought we researched these gems for the benefit of all Jurai. What has it to do with the Prince so specifically?"

"I… can't tell you that." Mikamo buried his head in his hands, running agitated fingers through his blond hair. "I'm sorry, Washu. I already said more than I should. Kagato trusts me and I won't break his trust."

“But you imply that something threatens his life.” Washu said carefully. “Or some*one*. Is that why we’re really here? Because Kagato-dono is afraid someone is trying to kill him?”

“Washu, please.” Mikamo looked helpless. “How can I betray the confidences of a Prince?”

“All right.” Washu sighed. “Then tell me this. The Dark Heart and her sister gems — what of those? Because since you began working on them directly, you’ve been having bad dreams. Forgetful moments. And you’re not usually so indiscreet with your promises. So something must have happened between our arrival here and now. Something to make these things happen.”

“You think the gems are making me dream like this?” Mikamo stared. Washu shrugged her shoulders.

“Tsunami’s magic is powerful and it has some psychic properties.” She reasoned. “You’ve also been in close contact with them — much more so than any of us. You said they were haunting your dreams… maybe its Tsunami’s magic that haunts you. Perhaps she doesn’t like her gems being experimented on so much.”

“I don’t believe in Tsunami in that way.” Mikamo said firmly, although flickers of doubt welled up inside of him.

“Well, maybe you should consider it.” Washu said flippantly. “Not believing something doesn’t mean it’s not there. I learnt that from Kihaku, Mikamo. Look at what Tokimi did there… for all the Juraian settlers believed there couldn’t be a woman who raged with such power and hate, they were still destroyed by her and her magic. Don’t be so quick to dismiss the idea. We are working within magical perameters. We know from our test results that Jurai’s core has unusual properties.”

“I did… there was… I was exposed to the gems once, I suppose. Directly, I mean.” Mikamo’s eyes widened as he remembered. “Kagato was putting them into your protective capsule, but something happened. I don’t even remember it clearly… there was a flash of light, and I was on the floor. Do you think…?”

“After effects from the radiation? Maybe.” Washu nodded. “It’s worth looking into further, if nothing else.”

“Maybe.” Mikamo frowned, pursing his lips. “At least that I can consider — it has scientific implications and those I am happier grappling with than the idea of a troubled Goddess sending warnings through her gemstones. Tomorrow I’ll see if there’s any truth in your

idea, Washu. I'll screen my blood and see for myself if there's some agent at work, giving me these horrible images when I sleep."

"Then it was worth talking to me after all, wasn't it, Mikamo-kun?" Washu asked playfully. Mikamo smiled, nodding his head.

"As usual, you're right." He murmured. "Thank you. And now, with any luck, we can both sleep in peace!"

Chapter 5

Chapter Five

So everyone in the palace was asleep.

Najya slipped silently through the hallways, drawing on all her stealth as she darted soundlessly from corridor to corridor, moving deeper and deeper within the palace complex as she did so. As she reached the quarters belonging to the Princess Aiko she faltered, eying the guard on duty with uncertainty, but she swallowed her fear, bringing her hands together as she muttered a soft, soothing incantation. As she watched, the man's head began to droop, lolling onto his chest as he slid to the ground. A gentle snore emitted from his mouth, and Najya sighed, shaking her head slowly as she stepped over his still form.

"Sorry." She muttered. "But the other alternative was to hurt you, and that's not something that I do."

She hesitated, then put her hands to the door of Aiko's chamber, pushing on it gently. She expected to find it locked, but to her surprise the door was slightly ajar and she slipped inside, her heart skipping a beat as she glanced around her at her surroundings. As soon as she crossed the threshold she knew that she was not alone, and a cold wind flared through her heart as a dark shape flitted past her, pushing her roughly aside as they disappeared through the open door.

Najya shivered, knowing all too well what that had meant.

"Princess Aiko?" She murmured, at once alarmed for the safety of her patron's mother, and her original mission forgotten, she hurried forward, pushing back the curtains that surrounded Aiko's bed as she frantically sought for signs that the Princess had been disturbed. The woman lay asleep, peacefully dreaming to all intents and purposes, but Najya threw caution to the wind, placing a cool hand to the Princess's shoulder as gently she shook her awake. Aiko's ruby eyes fluttered open in a second, surprise and alarm in her gaze as she registered the fact she was not alone. She let out an exclamation, pulling herself into a sitting position as she wrapped her blankets more tightly around her body.

"Dr Akara! What are you doing here?"

"I'm sorry, Princess. But someone was in your room." Najya bowed

apologetically, anxiety in her eyes. “I saw them leave and hurried to make sure that you were unharmed. Princess Aiko, forgive my intrusion. I only meant to ensure that they had not hurt you.”

“In my room?” Aiko’s expression became one of dismay and she pushed back her covers, running her fingers over the control for the lights as the room was suddenly bathed in brightness. Najya shielded her eyes from the glare as she watched the Princess hurry towards her dresser, pulling it open as she flicked through the papers that were hidden there.

At length she sighed, shaking her head.

“Why were you here, Dr Akara?” She asked, turning to her visitor with curious, wary eyes. “You scientists sleep in the institute, I know that. Why so deep in the palace?”

“I… I came to see you.” Najya admitted. “In a manner of speaking, I suppose. I wanted to speak to you… about something important. But when I saw the… the person leave, I panicked. I was worried for you — and your safety.”

“I see.” Aiko eyed her keenly, sitting down on the end of her bed. “Forgive me, but I’m not sure why I should believe you. There’s a guard outside this room… how would anyone get in without my knowing it?”

“The guard is asleep. Someone has bewitched him.” Najya said simply, carefully omitting the fact that Aiko’s attackers had arrived through different means, and may even have had Kagato’s clearance to enter her chamber. After all, she reasoned bitterly, there was no reason not to suspect that Aiko’s guards were not hand-picked men of Kagato’s own choosing. “Truly, Princess, I mean you no harm.”

“All right.” Aiko sighed. “I suppose had you meant to harm me, you could have easily done so while I was asleep. But still, Dr Akara, your work is with my son and his people. Why should that concern me — and to what degree does it so? It’s late — the middle of the night. What you have to discuss with me can’t possibly be mentioned in daylight?”

“For your own sake, I felt not.” Najya bit her lip, then, “Aiko-hime, my family are acquainted with a man named Akito Saotome. I believe yours are also.”

Colour drained from Aiko’s face, and she grasped Najya’s wrists in a vicelike grip, panic in her red eyes.

“Was there someone in my chamber, or was it you?” She hissed.

“Has it been your doing, the papers that have disappeared from my private place?”

“No!” Najya looked startled. “I would never steal your belongings, Hime-sama! On the honour of my family, I swear it. And truly, I’m not here to threaten or disturb you. I know the nature of your friendship with Akito Saotome, and I have done since before I came here. But it’s not my business… I don’t judge you for it, and I have no intention of doing anything about it.”

“Then why are you here?” Aiko’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. “What have you to gain from telling me this?”

“Akito works with my sister, Aya, on Airai.” Najya said softly. “And he has disappeared. Aya told me that he had made contact with you — that there had been letters from Jurai. I wondered if you knew his whereabouts. He is a close friend of Aya’s, and his safety worries me. I’m afraid… something might have happened to him.”

“Akito…” Aiko bit her lip, looking troubled. “For all I know, you might be trying to trap me into a confession. You might be here on the Emperor’s say-so, to try and eliminate the threat of my family from his succession.”

“I am of Airai. Not Jurai.” Najya held up her hands in a gesture of peace. “Akito’s family are dark mages — you know that already, I think. Akito himself was not, and nor was his father. But Hime-sama, if you know his current whereabouts, I must know it too. This is why I came to you tonight. On the orders of my Father, I am charged with discovering what happened to him. Although I confess I already fear the answer.”

She sighed.

“He was our hope of peace with the Saotome. He and his blood.” She murmured. “And now that seems gone forever, in light of everything. Please, Hime. Do you know where Akito-san is?”

Aiko bit her lip, slowly shaking her head.

“I have heard nothing from Akito since my last letter.” She said softly. “I only know he is missing. I know nothing else, and even Azusa-niisama’s attempts have not dug up anything conclusive. If he has fled, he has done a good job of it. But like you, I begin to fear the worst. His family are dangerous people, as you say.”

“I see.” Najya frowned. “That is what I thought.”

“Tell me, Dr Akara… are you really a scientist?”

“Yes.” Najya nodded her head, a sober expression in her ruby eyes. “But like you, I can’t always follow the path I want to. I have family loyalties, just like you do. My people seek peace, over everything. Peace with Jurai, peace with the Saotome. So I have to obey my father’s will as well as my own, Hime-sama. I’m sure you understand what that means.”

“Oh yes.” Aiko’s eyes clouded. “Your name is Akara. I’m slow. I have dealt with your people on many occasions, buying perfumes and fabrics for my own particular collection.”

Najya smiled.

“Your kindness to our clan has always been noted.” She said softly. “That is why we will protect your secret, Princess Aiko. We will not dishonour you in the eyes of those around you, just as you choose to respect us when everyone else fears our motivation.”

“Well, I know from my own experience that not all Arians are evil.” Aiko sighed, suddenly looking her full age as she ran her fingers through her hair. “You truly think that Akito is dead?”

“I’m afraid I’m certain of it, now.” Najya nodded gravely. “And that worse may be afoot. Your son has dangerous blood connections, hime, and little knowledge of them. He is vulnerable… he can be swayed.”

“Kagato is not an ordinary boy. He is a Prince of Jurai and Tsunami’s magic runs through him.” Aiko’s head snapped up at this. “I don’t fear for his magic, Najya-san, nor do I fear for his soul. He’s strong and he’s intelligent. I doubt he can be easily manipulated, and he knows nothing of his true heritage.”

Najya opened her mouth to refute this, then she sighed, shaking her head as she realised such knowledge could put the Princess’s own life in danger.

“I suspect whoever was in your room tonight sought evidence of your connection to Akito.” She said instead. “I can’t tell you much about it, because I don’t know enough to do so. But I know that there are some dangerous people on Jurai, Princess. Lock your door and ensure you are guarded by men who aren’t easily bewitched. It is possible that if the Akara know about your secret, so do the Saotome. Akito himself may have confided in his kin and been betrayed.”

“And you warn me why? For my own sake or for yours?”

“I wish I knew the answer to that.” Najya sighed, bowing her head once more. “I’m sorry again for disturbing you, Princess. I wish you a restful night.”

“Yes, I’m sure, after our conversation. I’ll sleep like a baby.” Aiko muttered. “My sister is away from Jurai, Akito might be dead, and someone is stalking around my quarters again in the dead of night, bewitching my guards as they seek to destroy the good name of both my son and I. In light of that, why would I not sleep?”

“I’m sorry.” Najya bit her lip. “I just thought you should know.”

“And so I should.” Aiko sighed. “I suppose I should be thanking you, all things considered.”

“No, don’t.” Najya shook her head. “I can’t promise that anything I’ve said will keep you or your secrets safe. I won’t betray them to anyone, you have my word as an Akara on it, Hime. But even so…”

She spread her hands.

“I would appreciate it if you would keep my confidence as I do yours.” She added. “I am not an Akara mage, merely a descendant of that line. And my work here is important to me.”

“An Arian spy, and I can’t report you to my Father’s secret police.” Aiko’s eyes flickered with humourless amusement. “How ironic. But you have my word. I will say nothing to anyone, so long as you keep your word about me.”

“I would not disgrace one who has only shown my people kindness.” Najya said softly. “Thank you, Hime. And again, I am sorry for the disturbance.”

With that she withdrew from Aiko’s quarters, pausing to glance at the guard as she left the room. As she did so, something caught her eye and she gasped, noticing for the first time the fresh spill of blood that stained the front of his uniform. Bending down at his side, she realised that someone had taken advantage of his stupor to slit his throat, and anger surged through her as she recognised the distinctive scent of Saotome magic.

“Well, Najya Akara. You seem eager to cause trouble, don’t you?”

A dark voice echoed out of the blackness, and Najya stood, gazing around her for any sign of the speaker.

“I know it’s you, Masaru.” She said coolly. “And I’m not afraid. You won’t kill me tonight, I promise you that.”

“I have no intention of doing so.” Masaru stepped from the shadows. “I merely left him as a warning to you. Do not try to interfere in things that don’t concern you. Don’t pretend your visit to Princess Aiko’s chambers tonight was innocent. You seek what we do

— the alliance of Jurai's royal house to your petty, pathetic cause. But you won't succeed. Princess Aiko is just another child of Jurai blood. Her son, however…"

"I'm well aware of what her son is." Najya said bitterly. "And the fact that being so makes him no true descendant of Jurai's Royal Tree. Get away from me, Masaru. Unless you want my Father to be informed, you'll do well to leave me be."

"You won't leave this planet alive, Akara." Masaru told her quietly. "I have the Prince's word in bond. Your time is limited… you cannot flee, and you will never speak to your father face to face again."

"We'll see." Najya's eyes narrowed. "If you're so sure I'll die here, why are you so hesitant to attack me? Why leave my fate to the word of someone else — someone who's only half Saotome kin?"

"Your magic is divided. I can tell. It would be futile to kill you, when half of your spirit is elsewhere." Masaru told her derisively. "I am patient. I will wait for a better time."

"And ending my life would not mean anything to my father's legacy." Najya shot back. "I'm not an only child. I have a sister. Killing me takes just my life. It doesn't destroy the Akara line."

"It moves us a step closer. You were always the stronger of his two daughters, after all." Masaru said clinically. "Be warned, Najya. Your people cannot triumph. We will win."

With that he disappeared, and Najya sank back against the wall, closing her eyes as she drew a deep breath into her lungs.

"He might be right." She muttered. "And the longer I'm here, the more dangerous my stay becomes. But so long as I can split myself and keep half of my spirit safe, he can't kill me so easily and he knows it, too. Still, I heard for myself the pact Kagato-dono made with him over my fate. Which means that I'm going to have to find a way to evade him, once my work here is done. So long as my death would look bad for Jurai, I have a reprieve. In that time, I must discover as much as I can and give Father and Aya as much warning as I can. After all, if I don't survive this adventure, they must be ready for whatever Kagato and Masaru decide to throw at them!"

"Lord Kagato, we have a problem."

Kagato pursed his lips, lowering his glass of wine as he glanced up at the intruders, a mixture of apprehension and irritation on his face. It was early the next morning, and he was in his private quarters,

musing over the discussions of the day before and the pact he had made with the travelling Arian clan. To sell his soul to the Saotome was little better than treating with demons, this he knew –and yet the thought of unlocking yet more power inside of him made every nerve tingle with anticipation and impatience.

“What is it?” He asked softly, quelling the urge to strike both knights dead where they stood for interrupting his deliberations. “I thought I told you two to be more discreet. You are still, technically speaking, servants of the Lord Emperor. That you’ve become so embroiled in my cause must not come to his notice… he already has enough cause to doubt me and I will not be given away by careless knights of Jurai.”

“It is not us you need to fear, Lord Kagato.” Tessei drifted neatly into the room, bowing elaborately before his prince as he did so. Kagato frowned, noting the slightly mocking nature of the gesture, but he made no demur as Tetta followed suit, dipping his head in his usual, brusque manner.

“Forget the niceties. Tell me what you know.” He said frankly. “What kind of a problem? Explain yourselves and do it quickly. I have much to do — much to complete.”

The two knights exchanged looks, then,

“Lord Mikamo.” Tetta began abruptly. Kagato raised an eyebrow.

“What about Lord Mikamo?” He asked quietly. “You’ll need to be clearer than that, Tetta. Has something happened in the confines of the laboratory that I should know about?”

“My Prince, Professor Niwase is becoming… how shall I phrase this… a potential liability.” Tessei said softly, his tones silken and ingratiating as he stood before his master. “He’s begun to… well, speak carelessly about incriminating matters. Not only this, but he’s suffered broken sleep, also. He’s had nightmares, my Lord… dangerous nightmares that could yet give away all of our plans.”

“I see.” Kagato’s brows drew together. “And how might you two know about such things?”

“He cried out, and the cry was heard all across the guest hall, my Lord.” Tetta said bluntly. “Tessei and I went to find out what the noise was. Before we demanded entrance to the chamber, however, we heard him speak. We both clearly heard him mention your name, and a reference to Jurai’s sacred gems.”

“And did anyone else overhear this?” Kagato asked gravely. Tessei

hesitated, then spread his hands.

“If you’ll forgive the insinuation, Prince Kagato, I believe he had someone else with him.” He said softly, his eyes glittering maliciously as he related this new, tantalising piece of gossip. “I heard… a woman’s voice. Trying to calm him. Tetta and I thought it best not to intrude lest our presence there put Lord Mikamo in a compromising position, and more, in case it was considered suspicious that we should be there. But they spoke in low tones after that — and neither of us overheard what was said.”

“A woman?” Kagato demanded sharply, sitting upright in his chair. “*What* woman?”

“Hard to say without seeing her.” Tetta acknowledged. “But my impression was it was that scientist woman, Lord Kagato. The one he brought here from the Academy. The Kii.”

“The Kii.” A nasty glint entered Kagato’s golden eyes. “I see. Professor Hakubi, I presume you mean. I thought at the time that there was more to Mikamo’s desire to involve her than just simple scientific method. After all, what kind of fool convinces himself a Kii has any true understanding of scientific principle? No, that makes things a lot clearer. But I’ve kept a very close eye on him, and I haven’t noticed any tangible signs of dalliance since he’s been a part of my team. Damn him! Do you think he’s told her? Things that he shouldn’t have said?”

“We could have her brought into custody and interrogated.” Tetta suggested. Kagato snorted, shaking his head.

“And generate suspicion across the whole planet? No, I think not, Tetta. I think not.” He said derisively. “I have been so very careful since all of this began. I’ve manipulated everything to my advantage with the minimum of fuss. Mikamo has worked diligently and tirelessly on the gemstones, and he’s finally begun to make serious progress with them, also. I’ve taken care of the man who sought to taint my mother’s reputation once and for all. I’ve stilled my aunt’s unborn child and prevented the chance of another heir coming into the equation. I’ve encouraged that lovesick fool Yosho in his hunt for Lady Haruna, knowing that it’s only a matter of time before he takes the decision to leave Jurai once and for all and head somewhere so remote even Grandfather will never find him. And I have you two as my insurance — to make sure that nothing can possibly go wrong while I’m executing my plans!”

He fell silent, then, in a sudden burst of rage he brought his hand

down with a resounding thud on the arm of his chair, making even the composed Tessei start and stare at him disconcertedly.

“I will not allow loose ends to creep into my plans so late on.” He whispered, his eyes darkening with anger. “If Mikamo is seeing this Kii woman, why did I not know about it sooner? As it is, I will probably have to kill her. He won’t like that — he may even become jumpy and suspicious of my true motives. But I can’t risk what she already knows.”

“Washu Hakubi may or may not be your true threat, Lord Kagato.” Tessei recovered himself, offering another bow of deference as he considered the point carefully. “My Lord, Mikamo Niwase is a trusted friend and advisor, I realise this and so does Tetta. But his discretion cannot be assured. The dreams are but one part of his recent erratic behaviour. It may come to the point where he no longer realises how much he is speaking… and to whom he is telling the wrong things. The magic in those gemstones is strong and legend has long said how it is capable of driving anyone not of true blood to insanity. Your own noble project to enhance and amplify the gems’ power has been successful so far. But perhaps it has created a potential foe out of one you consider friend?”

Kagato stared at the knight for a moment, and despite himself, a cold grip settled around his heart.

“You mean that it is not Washu Hakubi I should kill.” He said softly. “But Mikamo himself who is the true risk to all we do?”

“That is our thought, Lord Kagato. Yes.” Tetta agreed brusquely. “If he continues to talk and dream, he might create suspicion. One night of ill omens could be easily discarded. But if it were to continue…”

“I see.” Kagato ran agitated fingers through his thick dark hair. “Then I must speak to Mikamo myself. Assess the matter directly… and see what the situation is.”

“My Lord…”

“Mikamo Niwase is the one soul I have trust in, in this cold, bleak power struggle known as Jurai’s royal house.” Kagato snapped, raising his hand for silence. “And I will not end his life without taking into consideration the risk he poses to my project. He is loyal to me — he has always been loyal to me, which is more than can be said for you and your blatant grasping after power and immortality. I am the Prince and my will is all that matters to you. Bring Mikamo to me, and let me decide his fate for myself.”

The knights once more exchanged looks, but made no demur, bowing before their Prince.

“As you wish it, Lord Kagato.” Tessei said softly. “We will go directly, and send Professor Niwase to you.”

“Do so.” Kagato said coldly. “And say nothing to him of this or any other matter. I will decide whether he is a risk to my operation, not you.”

The knights withdrew, and Kagato got to his feet, pacing across the chamber to the window as he stared out sightlessly across the landscape. Memories flitted across his mind of young boys, teasing and playing in the Jurai sunlight, and despite himself he felt a sense of regret wash over him.

“Get a grip on yourself, Kagato.” He muttered, clenching his fists as he sought to control the alien emotion. “You are more than a Prince now… you are verging on being a God. This planet — everything in it — it will bow to you and be yours, no matter what Grandfather or anyone else thinks. Little does he know, when he thinks to denounce me as the Bastard of Jurai, that my bastard blood is the very thing which will make me so powerful and successful! Between Jurai’s power and Arian dark arts, there will be very little that can stand in my way. I shall not let weakness sway me from my cause. I’ve been the shadow prince too long… Jurai *will* be mine.”

He sighed, biting his lip.

“But I would rather not have to add Mikamo’s corpse to my list of deeds.” He acknowledged to himself sadly. “He has been loyal, and he is my friend. Even if I have no need of fawning, following courtiers and snivelling, power-hungry knights — Mikamo has never been either of these, and I value that. If it were Yosho — Yosho I could slay in a heartbeat, always taking the spotlight and toying with his inheritance like it was the least important thing in the world. But Mikamo has served me well. Will I have to reward his trust with death? I hope not. But if Tessei and Tetta are right and he is succumbing to the gems’ dark power…”

He shook his head as if to clear it, moving back towards his chair and sinking down into it with a heavy sigh.

“This is not a game for the faint-hearted.” He mused. “And Mikamo may not be the last sacrifice you have to make to ensure your future, Kagato. They say it gets easier… well, we’ll see. If Mikamo is a liability, then I will have to deal with him somehow. Nothing must stand in my way if I’m ever going to become the King of Jurai. Not

even the life of an old, dear friend."

Chapter 6

Chapter Six

Somehow, in the light of day, it didn't seem so foreboding.

Mikamo sighed, glancing down at the syringe that lay on the desk top before him. It was already filled with his blood and, as he scooped it up, he half-wondered whether he was letting his fears run away with him.

"Washu may be right, but then again, she may not be. And she has reason to err on the side of paranoia, but does that apply in this case?" He wondered, fumbling in the drawer for a slide as he prepared a sample of his haemoglobin for further analysis. "Well, I suppose to look can't hurt. And then at least I can tell Washu one way or another. That it's a warning from Jurai's Goddess is insanity itself talking — so it's either stress or maybe the radiation of the gemstones. And this should settle it one way or another. Once and for all."

"You're here early this morning."

Najya's voice startled him and he turned, offering her a sheepish smile as he set the syringe once more aside. At the sight of it his friend frowned, eying him curiously as she came to join him at the bench.

"Blood testing? What's wrong? Are you feeling unwell?"

"No, but I'm trying to prove or disprove a theory of Washu's about why I've been distracted lately." Mikamo spread his hands. "Simple stress doesn't work for her, so I buckled and agreed to look into it. I feel fine though, this morning. I think that she's overreacting."

"She loves you. It's to be expected." Najya shrugged her shoulders. "But it probably won't hurt to put her mind at rest."

She eyed him playfully, but Mikamo was aware of tiredness in her own ruby eyes.

"Is Washu up? She didn't come back to our room last night, so I imagine she was with you."

"She is, but I asked her not to be peering over my shoulder when I did this." Mikamo admitted. "It would just make me more nervous about the result. She headed back to your room to shower and change, so I guess that you just missed her."

“Probably.” Najya agreed. “I was up early myself this morning, all things considered.”

“You look tired, you know.”

“No more than you.” Najya sighed. “Trying to figure everything out in my head. Mikamo, you’ve seen these gemstones, haven’t you? I mean up close. In real life.”

“Yes.” Mikamo looked confused. “That’s what Washu thinks is behind my recent forgetfulness, in fact. What of it?”

“What are they like? Powerful? Powerful enough to amplify someone’s magic in the way we hypothesised?”

“Yes, I imagine so.” Mikamo agreed. “Certainly all the preliminary indications are that way.”

Najya perched on the desk with a blatant disregard for any chemicals that might have been spilled there, swinging her legs absently as she watched him prepare the slide carefully for examination.

“Why are we doing this, Mikamo?” She whispered. “What’s so important about this project that we have to discover such a thing about gems thousands of years old?”

“Najya?” Mikamo paused, eying her in consternation. “What do you mean? What’s wrong?”

“There are people on Jurai who want me dead.” Najya said blankly. “People who are in league with your Prince, Mikamo. I’ve heard them, and they’ve made it clear that I won’t leave Jurai alive. The war on Airai has spread to this one, and I’m not safe. I’m sure it means noone is — noone who works on these gems, in any case. I think we’ll all be picked off, one by one, and then there’ll be noone left to tell how Tsunami’s gemstones were amplified for personal use.”

“What are you suggesting?” Anger flared up inside Mikamo’s heart at this. “That all of this is designed so that Kagato can take control? Don’t be so naïve… you’re being stupid and more paranoid than even Washu is capable of! Kagato’s doing nothing of the sort. Don’t you realise how scared a man he is? Yosho may yet abandon Jurai. His aunt is in exile, possibly dying, we don’t even know what’s wrong with Lady Misaki or whether she will ever return. She might have been poisoned! Do you blame Kagato, then, for worrying about his own safety?”

“Maybe he was the one who poisoned her, did you think of that?”

Najya shot back. “Open your eyes, Mikamo. I came here because I wanted peace. Now I see the war is just spreading — and into dangerous, muddy waters. You’re my friend, this is your project… you have the power to stop this right now! You know where the gems are and you could prevent it from happening — only your research is far enough along to allow Kagato to infiltrate those gems with whatever evil he chooses. Don’t you realise that he’s raising Arian dark arts within him? Are you so blind to your boyhood friend that you can’t see the growing, resonating evil that emanates from within him?”

“How dare you speak of Kagato that way!” Mikamo was on his feet, indignation in his expression. “You know nothing about Juraian politics, and you could be put in prison for saying such things!”

“Like it will matter, when I’ll probably be dead anyway.” Najya said bitterly. “Mikamo, please. I trust you — I know you’re not a bad man. But you’re being deceived! This never was a project to help the many, was it? It was just a way to help Kagato increase his power — power that will taint Tsunami’s own magic and make him dangerous beyond anyone’s wildest beliefs. I know this family, Mikamo. I know this magic! It’s the devil’s own magic, and he seeks to use it for his own ends!”

“Najya, if you don’t stop talking…” Mikamo trailed off, and Najya frowned, coldness flickering in her expression.

“You’ll what? Kill me in his name, too?” She asked flatly. “No, you won’t. I’ve taken the precaution of dividing my spirit since I first knew there were Saotome Arians on Jurai. I’m not a fool. I may not know about Jurai’s politics, but I know plenty about Arian mages. You should listen to me, else you’ll be dead too. And Washu, and all of us. We need to stop this, before it goes any further. You have no idea what you’re unleashing, and I will not just stand back and see my friends hurt.”

“Dividing your…” Mikamo trailed off, and his eyes widened as he realised the implications of her words. “You lied to me! You swore that you had no mage-magic, and yet… you *are* an Akara, aren’t you? You are part of this demon tribe that Kagato warned me about? And now you want to use me in your own nefarious scheming… is that it? I’ve known Kagato since we were young, Najya. I know what sort of a man he is. Do you really think you can convince me so easily that he’s turned to the side of evil?”

“I imagine he was already there, with all that Saotome blood flowing through his veins.” Najya said coldly.

“Kagato is Juraian, you stupid, paranoid woman! Not Arian — Juraian!”

“Yes, so he’d like you to think. And I have too much honour to press the matter any further.” Najya retorted. “I never thought you could be so stubborn, Mikamo. I thought that if there was anyone I could rely on — trust in — it would be you. But you’re on his side, aren’t you? His side. And when he kills me — as he invariably will try to do — you can pretend you knew nothing about it. Forget that I warned you, just like you forget your pass keys, or what you were saying ten minutes before. You’ll probably forget this conversation too, given a little time and royal persuasion. You make me sick, Niwase-sensei. Here I was thinking I had a friend — and it turns out I was wrong, after all.”

Before Mikamo could answer, his companion hazed out of view, disappearing from the lab, and he groaned, burying his head in his hands.

“This is nuts.” He muttered. “She’s lied to me. She’s a mage. And so… what am I mixed up in? Kagato did warn me… he did mention the Akara and the fact they’re a powerful magical family. I thought I knew Najya, but now I realise I didn’t know her at all. She’s not here for the reasons I thought she was — she’s concealed it from me and she’s concealed it from Washu. What she said is crazy… and yet…”

He shook his head, forcing the thoughts from his mind.

“Kagato is my friend.” He muttered. “I trust him. Therefore I mustn’t question him quite so readily. Najya’s already proven she’s lied to me about her magical heritage. That means everything else she said might well be just as false. I have no reason to suspect Kagato of anything. And plenty of reason to be suspicious of Najya.”

He turned his attention back to the lab slide, peering half-heartedly into the microscope as he examined his red blood cells. As he did so, he bit his lip, noting the seared edges of some of the cells, and the odd shape of some of the others.

“Washu was right.” He whispered. “Damn it, she’ll never let me live it down! But what does it mean… for me? If these anomalies were caused by the gems, can it be halted? The dreams get more and more vivid as time goes on. Have I already been exposed to them too much, or is this something which can heal? I wish I knew.”

He frowned, realising as he did so that he was not going to tell his fiancée what he had found in his bloodwork.

“She’ll only worry and nag at me and I’ve got enough to consider without that on my conscience.” He said with a weary sigh. “I doubt Washu’s seen through Najya’s façade, even with her Kii sight. I’m sure that if she had, she’d have mentioned it. Which means that Najya’s true nature could be anything under the sun. And that makes her dangerous, too. But what should I do about it? Is there anything I can do about it? I wish I knew the answer to that.”

“The answer to what, Mika-chan?”

His fiancee’s voice echoed in his ear and he jumped, turning to face her.

“You’re trying to give me a heart attack, aren’t you?” He demanded, offering her a grin. Washu shook her head.

“No, but I did want to see how you got on.” She replied. “Also, something else. Mikamo, what did you say to Najya this morning? Seriously? Because the girl’s in our room right now, and she’s not happy. Actually, when I left, I thought she might be going to cry. I asked her what was wrong, but she blanked me completely. She won’t tell me anything about what happened — all I managed to get out of her was that she’d gone to speak to you. Did you two fight?”

“No, it’s nothing. Just a misunderstanding between friends who got no sleep last night.” Mikamo rubbed his temples. “Really. I’m sorry if Najya’s upset. I’m sure I didn’t mean to make her cry.”

“Well, no doubt she’ll get over it, but you need to watch your tongue, Mikamo-kun.” Washu said firmly. “Especially at the moment, when you’re given to saying things without thinking.”

She glanced at the microscope.

“Well? What of my idea? Do we have any conclusive results?”

“I don’t know.” Mikamo bit his lip. “I don’t know what I’m looking for.”

“You trained in medicine and you don’t know what you’re looking for?” Washu grimaced at him. “You make a worse liar than Najya does, I swear. Give me that. Let me see.”

“Washu…” Mikamo began, but his fiancée already had her eye to the magnifier, gazing down at the uncertain sample on the slide below. There was a moment of silence, then she raised her gaze to his.

“You know.” She said quietly, hurt in her eyes. “But you were going to keep it from me. Why?”

“Because it’s something you’ll worry about.” Suddenly Mikamo felt very tired. “Look, Washu, when I woke up I felt much better. Maybe there is something going on, but I expect it’s healing, little by little. Talking last night did help… I didn’t want to make you fret.”

“I’m not going to be protected. I want to know the truth.” Washu said firmly. “You have more medical training than me, but even I can see that your sample isn’t normal. Promise me you’ll keep an eye on it, Mika-chan. And if it gets worse, you’ll seek medical assistance. Even if it means going back to your family and getting a blood transfusion on Seniwa… promise me, all right?”

“All right.” Mikamo kissed her gently on the brow. “I promise, if it will make you happy.”

“Lord Niwase.”

Tetta’s brusque voice from the doorway startled the couple apart, a stricken look crossing Mikamo’s face as he realised how compromising a position the Knight had seen him in. Tetta made no remark on it, however, merely bowing abruptly before the Seniwan scientist, and gesturing to the door.

“Prince Kagato requests your company as soon as is convenient, my Lord.” He said frankly.

“Then I’ll come now, before we begin work for the day.” Mikamo decided. “Washu…”

“Oh, I know. I’ll clean up your mess.” Washu sighed. “Go see what his Highness wants.”

“Thank you.” Mikamo grinned at her, then he nodded at the knight, following him from the lab and closing the door behind him. Tessei stood in the corridor beyond, and Mikamo glanced at their faces, trying to work out the reason for his sudden summons.

“You seem grave.” He murmured. “Is something wrong?”

“The Prince will explain everything, when we get there.” Tessei said smoothly. “It’s just a little matter of business, that’s all. Something regarding the top secret work you do for Lord Kagato. Nothing more.”

“Then I’ll come with pleasure, although I wish he’d summon me on some reason other than business. He seems so serious of late.” Mikamo reflected.

“The Prince has many concerns, as I’m sure you’re aware.” Tessei agreed. Mikamo frowned, but did not press the matter further. At this

moment, they reached Kagato's own private quarters, and Tetta knocked heavily on the door, pushing it open with his usual forcefulness as the Prince's voice came through the wood.

"Mikamo."

As the scientist stepped inside, his friend stood from where he had been sitting, gesturing for his companion to take a seat. "I'm glad you could come. Tessei, Tetta, leave us. We must speak and I won't have eavesdroppers on my conversations."

"Yes, sir." Tetta bowed his head, and as Tessei seemed to hesitate, the brawny knight grabbed his lighter colleague by the arm, wrenching him out into the hallway as the door banged behind them. Kagato chuckled at this, shaking his head slowly.

"Tetta lacks brains sometimes, and finesse, too. But he has more sense than Tessei when it comes to obeying orders." He observed. "Tessei has too much ambition for his own good… I find it easier to instruct a simple man like Tetta in the things I wish done."

"The Emperor still doesn't know you've commandeered them for your own purposes, then?" Mikamo asked lightly, and Kagato shook his head, retaking his own seat as his friend sank down into one of the vacant chairs. "What's this about, Kagato? We just discussed the project. Is something wrong? Your humour seems a little forced."

"I want to ask you something, Mikamo." Kagato admitted. "And I want you to tell me the truth. I don't pretend I'll be pleased, if my suspicions are correct. But I'll be more disappointed in you if you lie to me. You can trust my discretion — and I'd like to be set straight."

"About what, exactly?" A whirl of thoughts flooded through Mikamo's mind, and Kagato smiled, shrugging his shoulders.

"When you advised me about staff at the Academy, you insisted that Professor Hakubi be among the party." He said lightly. "And I've received a report that suggests you have other reasons than scientific ones for wanting the woman here on Jurai. You know my planet's history as regards Kihaku and the heathen people who lived there. Tell me, Mikamo — are you or are you not romantically involved with this Hakubi woman?"

Mikamo stared at him for a moment, realising with a start that relief, not horror washed over his body at the Prince's words. With Najya's accusatory speech still foremost in his mind, he reflected, to be accused of harbouring a secret mistress was almost nothing in comparison. Slowly he nodded his head.

“I won’t lie to you.” He admitted. “And I didn’t seek to deceive you. I didn’t want you involved in our secrets, that’s all. Because it might have got you into trouble, and believe me, I’m making enough of my own already.”

“I see.” Kagato frowned. “And you didn’t think that bringing your woman here would drag me right into the middle of it? This is something I can’t afford to deal with, Mikamo, if it should become public. You told me yourself that you came here originally because your parents didn’t approve of your choice of woman. Now I think I can understand why. You’ve been bewitched by a Kii, and no wonder they’re dismayed. You’re a noble son of a Daimyo family, yet you seek to spend your time with a woman of savage birth?”

“Washu isn’t a savage and I love her. More than anything.” Mikamo said quietly. “And if you ask me to stop seeing her, Kagato, I’ll refuse. If it means I leave Jurai — or that Washu and I both do — so be it. I know what it’s like to be parted from her, and I won’t be. Not again. I’m already prepared to give up my family’s ties and all claim I have to any part of the Niwase inheritance. Once our project here is over, she and I intend to marry, and then disappear into oblivion. No matter what you say, Kagato — you won’t get me to change my mind. It’s already made up.”

“You plan to sever ties with your family, over a Kii?” Kagato blinked, then, “And all this time you’ve been here, you’ve been strengthening this relationship behind my back?”

“Are you angry with me?” Mikamo asked evenly. “I know it was arrogant of me to act that way, but still, Kagato, if you loved anyone as I do her…”

“How much does she know?” Kagato interrupted quietly. “About our plans, Mikamo — how much have you told her?”

“Told her?” Mikamo frowned, then, “Nothing, of course. I don’t betray confidences, Kagato. Not of this nature. Not even to Washu.”

“Do you give me your word on that?”

“Of course. You shouldn’t even need to ask.” Mikamo’s expression became one of consternation. “What is this, Kagato? Are you cross that I should have a mistress? Or is something else going on? Someone told me that there were Arians on Jurai — is this true?”

Kagato’s eyes widened at this, a brief look of dismay touching his amber eyes, and Mikamo felt his heart catch in his throat as he surveyed the friend he had thought he knew so well. Kagato regained

his composure almost immediately, but it was too late, and for the first time Mikamo saw a hint of insincerity behind the man's broad smile.

"There's Najya Akara." The Prince said flippantly. "But I believe we've already discussed her."

"Najya." Mikamo bit his lip. "Yes."

"Something you think I should know, Mikamo?" Kagato asked softly. Mikamo raised his gaze to his friend's, hesitating for a moment as he debated telling the Prince what his colleague had said. Then he shook his head, uttering a heavy sigh.

"No." He said at length. "And I didn't mean Najya. At least, I don't think I did. I heard there were others — ones who might mean Jurai harm."

"There are occasionally Arian visitors here, to see my mother and negotiate certain trades." Kagato said evenly, his composure once more impeccable as he sat back in his seat. "But other than that, I don't know what you mean. Of course, if it's true, it's concerning. But I haven't heard anything at all which would suggest it was."

"You would do something about it, if it were true?"

"Mikamo, I'm a Prince of Jurai." Kagato said quietly. "What benefit could I possibly see in letting Arians run riot around my planet? Don't be silly. I'm almost sorry I mentioned the Akara girl's possible connections to you now. I didn't think you were the kind of man to see enemies in every corner."

"I'm not." Mikamo sighed again. "And I'm sorry. Truly, Kagato, I haven't felt quite myself for a few weeks now. On and off, I've had lapses of forgetfulness and clumsiness, and strange dreams have been haunting my sleep. Washu nagged me about it and I actually stopped to look at my blood this morning. I'm not sure what exactly caused it, but there's definitely some anomaly. Washu thinks that our work on the Dark Heart might have caused it, and I don't know — could she be right?"

"You're Seniwan. Not Juraian." Kagato said dismissively, though Mikamo thought he saw intrigue burning in his friend's expression. "Tsunami's magic can have no impact on you. It must be something else. But if you are unwell, Mikamo, won't you let me summon a doctor to see you?"

"No, I'll be fine." Mikamo suddenly realised he had no desire to let any physician of his friend's anywhere near him. "And I should get

back to the lab. We have a lot to do today, if we're going to get results as soon as I know you'd like them."

"Yes." Kagato agreed evenly. "And I won't do anything about your lover, Mikamo, so long as you are discreet. If you are discovered, Tsunami help you, because I won't be in a position to do anything to shield you. But I won't say anything myself. After all, I'd be a poor friend if I told your secrets to strangers, now wouldn't I?"

Mikamo smiled, nodding his head.

"And you should know that I'd never betray yours, even to the woman I love." He said frankly. "You're becoming too wary, Kagato. Too suspicious. You need to relax. Not everyone wants to see you dead, you know."

With that he cast his friend a parting grin, pulling open the room of the chamber and slipping out into the hallway beyond. He nodded his head slightly to the waiting knights, both of whom he felt sure had eavesdropped on at least some of their conversation. Then he hurried back in the direction of the institute, deep in thought.

"Najya's managed to spook me this time." He muttered. "Or is it the effects of those gems, starting to mess with my mind? Am I becoming paranoid, too? Why was I so sure that I didn't want Kagato's doctors seeing my blood? And what about when I mentioned Arians? What was that look… did I imagine the way his face changed colour? But Kagato is my friend. How could I misjudge him so badly, if Najya's side of things is correct? I'm so confused it's making my head hurt. I know Kagato's a desperate man — but what if he's being manipulated by these people? Threatened or intimidated somehow? It would explain his sudden fixation with the project and the edginess I've noticed about him these last months. He's become more and more obsessed, and it's unnerving, when I come to think about it. He spends less time at court, less time doing the things he always used to do. Most of the time he's in his study, working on this or that or worrying about what goes on here. Is he really that afraid for his life that he's let himself become a prisoner of his fear?"

As he crossed the courtyard, he became aware of a young girl watching him, intense amber eyes fixed on his body, and he paused, glancing at her uncertainly. She dimpled, bowing her head in acknowledgement of his presence, then she was gone across the grass, her movements swift and dainty, almost as if she were walking above the grass, rather than through it. Transfixed, Mikamo could only stare as she reached her destination, holding out a hand to clasp the fist of a tall man, mahogany hair braided down his back and a forbidding look

in his golden eyes. Very slowly he bowed his head, and Mikamo found himself echoing the gesture. Then he turned on his heel, hastening back towards the laboratory before any more strange things could happen.

The man's cold amber eyes burned into his memory, however, and as he reached the door of the institute, Najya's words flooded through him once again.

"I imagine he was already there, with all that Saotome blood flowing through his veins."

"Saotome." He murmured. "What is that? What did she mean?"

He frowned, pushing open the door and stepping into the foyer, but instead of heading towards the lab, instead he made for the hallway which led upwards towards the chamber Najya and Washu both shared. He knocked on the door hesitantly, half-afraid his colleague would not let him in, but the door slid back to reveal the girl, cold red eyes staring up at him in impassive silence.

"Najya, I want to talk to you." Mikamo's words sounded alien to his own ears, and Najya raised an eyebrow, stepping back from the door to allow him to enter.

"Now you want to talk to me?" She echoed, her words cold and empty. "Or has your Prince sent you to kill me, Niwase-sensei? Does he think I'll let you closer to me than I will him or his Saotome shadows?"

"No." Mikamo said frankly. "I don't kill anyone. And I'm sorry. Washu said I upset you and I was maybe harsher than I needed to be. Kagato and I have been friends for a long time, and what you said — I found it hard to absorb. That's all. Especially considering the fact you've lied to me as well."

"Would you have ever trusted me, if you'd known my true nature?" Najya demanded, folding her arms defensively across her chest.

"Maybe. I don't know. We'll never have the chance to find out now."

"Did you tell Washu?"

"No, but you should, if you want her to trust you too." Mikamo said flatly, dropping down onto his fiancee's neatly made bed. 'In the meantime, I've been thinking. And speaking to Kagato. Not about you!' As Najya flinched. "Or about what you said to me. But I want to know what you meant, about these people on Jurai. These Saotome

Arians — that is right, isn't it?"

"Yes. That's right." Najya moved to the window, resting her chin on the sill. "I can smell them. Smell their dark magic, even from here. It makes me nauseous just knowing they're so close."

She turned back towards him, eying him accusingly.

"Why are you so interested now? I thought you trusted in your friend, Professor Niwase."

"I do." Mikamo frowned, shaking his head as if to clear it. "At least I thought so. But things… something was wrong today. I don't know what, but when I asked him about Arians on Jurai, he had a strange look on his face. He didn't seem himself… he hasn't for a while, now I think about it. I've just been too preoccupied to really notice the change. I'm concerned that these people might have hurt him somehow. Taken advantage of his weakness and his insecurity and infiltrated him in some way."

"You believe that, if you like." Najya said flatly. "Me, I'll stick to what I've known all along. Birds of a feather flock together."

"Will you stop talking in riddles and explain what you mean?" Mikamo's frustration bubbled up into temper, and he glared at her, annoyance in his eyes. "I want to understand, Najya, because as far as I see it, two friends of mine may be in trouble because of these people. You, because you obviously know who they are. And Kagato, because he's vulnerable in some way that I don't even understand!"

"I cannot." Najya said simply. "I gave my word I would not, and I will not. If you don't know now what I've tried to tell you, you shouldn't be a scientist, let alone a Professor. If you can't make that kind of deduction…"

She sighed, shaking her head.

"The Saotome are dark mages from Airai. My family are white mages. We are rivals, and my family seek peace." She added regretfully. "So many of our kind have been killed in the pursuit of that end, and yet we keep trying. Our eyes are red — some say as rubies, but our clan legends say that the colour of our eyes was born out of the number of Akara slain at Saotome hands in the beginning of the conflict so many generations ago. And theirs… theirs are gold, said to represent the fires of Airai's sun. In Arian mythology, the sun is a demon — a killer of plants and crops, a scorcher of fields, a bringer of fire. And so the Saotome bear the Sun Demon in their eyes, just as we bear the blood of our ancestors in ours."

“Gold eyes.” A cold chill spread across Mikamo’s heart. “That’s what you meant. Like Kagato. Isn’t it?”

Najya didn’t answer, and Mikamo clenched his fists angrily.

“Dammit, Najya, tell me the truth!” He exclaimed. “You said he had Saotome blood. You’re trying to tell me my friend is bastard-born, aren’t you? That he’s no Prince of Jurai, but an illegitimate son trying to gain power and influence through any means possible!”

Najya closed her eyes briefly, and Mikamo could see the glitter of tears on her cheeks.

“I will not betray my promise to Lady Aiko.” She whispered. “But you are too sensible a man not to guess my answer.”

“Those people. The man and… and the girl, outside, watching me.” Suddenly the air in the chamber seemed stifling, as images flickered in and out of Mikamo’s troubled senses. “They had gold eyes too. Eyes like Kagato’s, that’s why I noticed them. They stared at me so hard… as if looking for something… trying to figure out my motivation. Were they the Arians you mentioned, Najya? The ones you think are here to kill you?”

“They’re not here to kill me, though they will if they get the chance.” Najya sighed, sinking down onto her own bed as the tension seeped out of her. “My father is the Akara mage. I’m his heiress. Killing me removes a stepping stone… a link in the chain that keeps the Akara clan alive. So I split myself, to make it more difficult for them to find me. Half of my spirit is sealed away from them, so they can’t slay me so easily as they’d like. But their true purpose here is far darker. They came with the same aim in mind that I had. To make an ally of Prince Kagato and through him, Jurai. With the support of this planet, and even of Tsunami’s magic, one clan could subdue the other forever. And if the Saotome magic spread… you can’t even begin to imagine the suffering. Even on Airai, whole villages have been wiped out by soul-hexing curses and other dark practices. Do you still think I’m a stupid, paranoid woman, Mikamo? Or do you at last see that we’re all in danger, so long as we keep working on these gems?”

Mikamo sighed.

“What does Washu know about this?”

“Nothing, yet… I’m not entirely sure how much I can trust her with, even now.” Najya admitted. “And you mustn’t either, until I know more. Mikamo, I’m not so afraid for my own life. But if Kagato finds out you know even this much…”

She trailed off, and Mikamo bit his lip.

“It may already be too late.” He realised, remembering his abnormal bloodwork. “I was exposed to the gems fully once, and there are anomalies in my blood. I might already be damaged beyond help.”

“Then let me help you.”

Najya crossed the room, taking his hands in hers as she closed her eyes, a soft bluish white haze enveloping the two of them. It tickled and danced across Mikamo’s nerves, but it was not unpleasant, and as it slipped beneath his skin, he did not resist it’s teasing explorations of his circulatory system. At length the grip on his fingers loosened, and he glanced at her quizzically.

“What was that?”

“I’m not a true mage yet, and only half strength, but I’ve done what I can to heal you.” Najya said quietly. “I’m sorry I shouted at you too, Mikamo-sensei. I’m frightened, frustrated and alone. Of all people, I wanted to trust in you. Please tell me that I can.”

“You can.” Mikamo nodded, making up his mind. “Whatever’s going on, I think it’s time I got to the bottom of it, once and for all.”

Chapter 7

Chapter Seven

So now what?

Kagato paused at the end of the stone-flecked pathway, gazing up at the tall building with a frown on his face and a troubled glitter in his amber eyes. As he moved closer to Tsunami's shrine, he re-ran his mind over the conversation with Mikamo, and his frown deepened.

"Well, so he has a lover. Tessei and Tetta were right, and about her identity." He muttered. "And given that fact, does that mean they're right about other things, too? Mikamo did say that he wasn't himself of late. Could the gems have so affected his genetic structure… could they have made him unreliable? Of all people, I do not want to slay Mikamo. But yet…"

He sighed, shaking his head as if to clear it as he pushed back the thick curtain that seperated the central shrine from the outlying chambers, and for a moment he paused, gazing up at the carved figure of the Goddess, serene in her sandstone likeness.

"Tsunami-kami-sama." He murmured. "All this to wake and strengthen your power inside of me. That's what I truly want, after all. To wield the magic my cousin does, only with more thrust and energy than anyone else. I want to be the true claimant to Jurai's throne. It's said that whoever can best master Jurai's Power will always be the King of this world. That's my ambition… can Saotome magic really help me to do that? Or am I simply moving further and further from my objective?"

"Cousin, you seem troubled."

A voice echoed from the darkness, and Kagato visibly jumped, his hand hovering to the hilt of his sword as he swung around. Yosho was leaning up against the doorway, eying him in some amusement, and with a heavy sigh, Kagato relaxed, rubbing his temples.

"It's only you." He said slowly. "Yosho, I thought I was alone."

"You were. I just got here." Yosho admitted, coming across the stone slabs to join him. "But Tsunami's shrine is not somewhere I often see you come of your own accord, Cousin. Why now? Something on your mind?"

“A good many things.” Kagato grimaced. “I’m having no luck tracing the Lady Haruna, Yosho. And as I try, I feel there are people closing in on me from all sides. Lady Misaki is no longer on Jurai — the rumour is that she was poisoned, and by our Grandfather. How would you feel? I may be next in line.”

“I don’t believe Grandfather poisoned Obasama.” Yosho frowned, shaking his head. “He can be cold and ruthless, but I don’t think he’d murder his own family. Especially not just because of me… Kagato, you worry too much. Misaki-sama’s illness is connected to her miscarriage nine months or so ago. I know, because I asked Uncle Haru.”

“Really?” Kagato looked startled. “She’s still weakened from that?”

“Apparently so.” Yosho shrugged his shoulders. “Haru-ojisama doesn’t seem willing to disclose any details, and he made it clear he didn’t want to talk to me about anything, let alone his wife’s illness. But that was my impression. You know that conceiving a child of Jurai’s blood can take a physical toll on a woman’s body… remember our Grandmother’s fate? It seems Misaki-obasama is just another victim of the same curse.”

“Maybe.” Kagato acknowledged. He turned towards the Goddess again, staring up at her.

“Yosho, will you leave me alone for a while?” He asked hesitantly. “I need… some time by myself.”

“Of course.” Yosho nodded. “I was only going to make offering to the Goddess for Haruna’s safety and that I will find her soon. That’s all. I can wait.”

“Thank you.” Kagato clasped his cousin’s hand briefly, bowing his head, and the Prince smiled. Then he withdrew, and Kagato was left alone in the temple. As he sank down on one of the wooden benches, he gazed up at the benevolent face that had blessed his people since before the dawn of written records. As he sat there, running his gaze over her features, he let out a faint gasp of dismay. As the light of the setting sun glittered in through the shrine windows, it rested on the curves and indentations of the wall carving, and for the briefest of moments, Kagato had the impression that the Goddess’s clothing was tinged with blood. He swallowed hard, struggling to regain his composure.

“How far am I willing to go?” He whispered. “I told Masaru that I’d do anything it took to become King of Jurai. I have to mean it, if I don’t want this to fall apart. I don’t care if Aunt Misaki dies because of

something I did. I feel nothing for the passing of her infant, or of my father. But killing Mikamo — killing someone who has always been a steadfast friend… can I do that, too?"

He lowered his gaze, unwilling to look at the likeness any more, and when he raised his eyes again, the illusion of blood was gone. He sighed, getting slowly to his feet as he brought his hands almost automatically together in a gesture of homage.

"Tsunami preserve me from what I intend to do." He said sadly. "I will speak to Mikamo one more time. I will tell him… all the things he doesn't know. And then, if he seeks to betray me, I will have no choice. I must give him one last chance to prove his loyalty to me… I will not kill my old friend out of hand. But either way, I must know. Can he really be trusted?"

"Can anyone be trusted, Prince Kagato?"

Masaru's voice echoed eerily around the shrine and as Kagato's head jerked up, he saw the mage haze into view ahead of him, blocking his path to the door of the shrine.

"What is it?" Impatience masked his fear, and he put his hands on his hips. "Answer me, Masaru. You have no business being in Tsunami's temple — why are you here?"

"I don't fear the magic of your Goddess, and if I am to maintain the guise of a colonist, why should I not come here?" Masaru asked simply, though there was malice glittering in his golden eyes. "I came looking for you, of course. Why else would I step into this heathen place, if not to find my kinsman?"

"Keep your voice down!" Kagato's eyes widened with alarm, and Masaru laughed.

"Surely you don't fear witnesses?" He asked, a challenge in his tone. "I thought you were willing to kill in pursuit of this objective. Have you changed your mind?"

"No." Kagato turned away, leaning against the wall as he glanced back at Tsunami. Then he did a double-take. Had he imagined it, or was that the glitter of tears on her lashes? He blinked, rubbing his eyes, but as he looked back, the Goddess's form was as serene and silent as ever, nothing more than carved stone hewn into the rock by a master craftsman. He sighed, shaking his head.

"No, Masaru, I haven't changed my mind." He said at length. "But I don't believe in unecessary risks — or unecessary bloodspill. It creates complications. I don't like complications. I don't seek to draw

attention to myself — not yet."

"I see." Masaru tut-tutted, shaking his head in disapproval. "You still lack the courage in your convictions to be open in your moves for power. Still, you are not yet at your full strength. You have much potential, but you rely too much on the power of that charlatan Goddess. Till you learn to manipulate that for darker purposes, you will never be as strong as you could be."

"I'm doing my best." Kagato defended himself. "It's not something that comes naturally, you know — replacing the culture I was born into with something else!"

"And what of the scientist, Kagato-dono?" Masaru's voice was dangerously low, and Kagato started, staring at his companion in alarm.

"Scientist? Najya?"

"No. Not that girl." Masaru dismissed this with a flick of his fingers. "I meant the man. Mikamo Niwase. I understand from your Knight Tessei that he's a close confidant of yours. Even, dare I say, an old friend?"

Kagato's eyes narrowed, and he folded his arms across his chest, aware of the defensiveness rising inside of him as he did so.

"Yes, he is." He agreed quietly. "And so if you ask whether I'm going to kill him, at the moment, the answer is no. He's served me well, Masaru, and I want to trust him."

"I thought you trusted noone."

"Mikamo is my friend!"

"Would he remain so, if he knew about you the things that we do, Kagato?" Masaru's eyes bored into the Prince's soul, causing an involuntary shiver to rocket down Kagato's spine. "Listen to me. There are no friends in the pursuit of ultimate power. This is no time to listen to your weak Juraian blood. According to the Knight, Professor Niwase is a liability already. Do you wish you see your plans dissolve into dust because you were too weak to slay one troublesome man?"

Kagato pursed his lips.

"Tessei seems to have unburdened himself of a lot of things." He said quietly. Masaru looked amused.

"We have ways to persuade such men to talk. He is no fool." He agreed. "But you shouldn't be angry. We are your allies, Kagato.

Ramia and I and all of your Saotome kin."

"Is Tessei dead?"

"No." Masaru shook his head. "I gave him the choice. He could either tell us what I wanted to know, or I would take his life. He chose the former. If you wish to kill him for his betrayal, go right ahead… but I can't be bothered with such a man as that."

A sudden burst of anger flooded through Kagato's body at this, and he stormed forwards, pushing the mage aside as he headed for the entrance to the shrine. As he stepped out into the growing twilight, he was aware of Masaru's laugh somewhere behind him, and then the mage's hand dropped down onto his shoulder, forcing him to meet the man's gaze once more.

"I can track you as easily as I can my daughter and Najya Akara, now you have woken Airai's magic inside of you." He whispered. "Just as you can sense my presence, and those others who claim the same magical energy as you possess. So you can't think to turn your back on me. If you have sense, you won't choose to. I'm more powerful than anyone else who believes in your cause. You need me, Kagato Saotome Jurai. More than you know."

"I'm capable of doing this myself, you know." Kagato shook off Masaru's hand, but the mage was not dissuaded.

"Capable of much, true, but not clinical or decisive enough to become Emperor of Jurai without my help." He said frankly. "Your friend won't understand, Kagato. And then you'll come back — then you'll need my help."

Kagato hesitated for a moment. Then he sighed, shaking his head.

"I must give Mikamo the chance to save his own life." He said quietly. "If that's weak, so be it. He is my friend, and I do not seek to hurt him. But keep this in mind, Masaru. If he chooses against me, when he knows, then I will know what I have to do. If I must act, I will act. I do not seek to spill blood unecessarily. But if it comes to it, I will do it. I told you nothing would stand in my way and I meant that. I will do whatever it takes to further my ambitions as King of Jurai."

———

"You're still here."

Mikamo glanced up from his lab desk, eying his fiancee with a mixture of consternation and affection as he nodded his head, stepping back from the desk and setting the goggles he had been

wearing down on the unit before him. Within his reach, a bunsen burner flickered with light, and a thick greenish liquid bubbled and spat particles into the air as slowly it reached boiling point.

“What are you doing here, Washu?” He asked softly. “I thought everyone had finished here for the night.”

“I’ve barely seen you all today.” Washu’s eyes narrowed.

“That’s silly. We’ve been working together all day.”

“You’ve barely spoken to me, though.” Washu put her hands on her hips. “And now you’re telling me to go away? Mikamo-kun, what is it? What’s wrong with you?”

She stepped closer to the burner, covering her nose at the smell.

“Mikamo, that stuff is toxic, or had you forgotten?”

“Not now. I’ve refined it beyond what you began, and inhaling the fumes won’t do anything except make you a little dizzy.” Mikamo shook his head. “You did say you wanted me to work on it, so I am. This truth serum of yours interests me, Washu-chan. I’m looking into the possibilities.”

“And I’m supposed to believe this is normal behaviour? Mikamo!” Washu grabbed him by the arm, pulling him away from the burner as she gazed up at him. Mikamo’s heart clenched at the concern in her expression, and he sighed, shaking his head as he held her tightly in his arms.

“I love you so much, you know that?” He murmured. “Trust me, will you? I can’t explain yet. I will, but I can’t — not right at the moment. Just have a little faith in what I do. I’m not mad, I promise.”

“I wish I knew that for sure.” Washu sighed, leaning up against his body as she did so. “You’ve been so weird lately… and having seen your blood…”

“Yes…” Mikamo pursed his lips. “Well, Najya helped me on that account. She had an… idea. And I think it worked.”

“Najya?” Washu pulled away from him, gazing up at him in surprise. “You asked her for help? I thought you were fighting.”

“We made up our argument.” Mikamo shook his head. “I came to see that her point of view was more valid than I’d thought.”

“More cryptic clues.” Washu sighed heavily. “Why do I feel you’re keeping secrets from me?”

“Maybe because I am.” Mikamo owned. “And I don’t like it. But really, Washu, I can’t explain just yet. In time, it will all make sense.”

“If you say so.” Washu bit her lip, and Mikamo saw the uncertainty in her green eyes.

“Washu, I thought you trusted me.”

“I do.” Washu admitted. “But still… I want to know what’s going on with Najya, Mika-chan. If something is, I want to know.”

“Najya?” Mikamo’s eyes opened wide, then, “Do you think I’m cheating on you? Is that it?”

“I… no.” Washu shook her head. “I know you’re not. But sometimes my mind plays paranoid tricks on me, that’s all. And I can’t explain so many things at the moment. I guess I just need to hear you say it, even though I know it isn’t true.”

“Well then, I give you my word that Najya and I are no more than friends.” Mikamo said softly. “And if you want me to drink my serum to prove it, then I will. I’m not afraid of it, and I’m sorry if I’ve given you the wrong impression. It really has nothing to do with romance of any kind. It’s a scientific problem.”

“The problem Najya’s been working on, in her own time?” Washu’s eyes burned with curiosity, and Mikamo nodded.

“Yes. Something like that.”

“And does this sudden urge to clarify truth serum have something to do with it?”

“Sort of.” Mikamo sent her a crooked smile. “Stop it, will you? I told you. Trust me. I can’t give you any more than that.”

“All right.” Washu sighed. “I’ll trust you.”

She peered at the solution once more, pursing her lips as her companion added a couple of chemicals, watching as it burned and fizzed with energy.

“It’s almost silver.” She whispered. “You really have been working on this, haven’t you?”

“It’s been on my mind for a while, yes.” Mikamo agreed. “What you already did broke through a lot of the difficult preliminaries. But I’ve tried to refine it as best I can to make it safe for use.”

“You must have someone in mind, if you’re so keen to do this now.”

“I do.” Mikamo acknowledged.

“And you can’t tell me even that?”

“No, because it might put you in danger.” Mikamo’s eyes softened. “All in good time, Washu-chan. All in good time.”

Washu’s eyes narrowed, and she glanced from the serum to her fiance, pursing her lips.

“I see.” She murmured. “This little cocktail wouldn’t be for our honoured patron, would it?”

Mikamo did not trust himself to answer, merely turning his attention to his notes, and Washu sighed.

“All right. Be that way.” She said at length, resignation in her voice. “I’ll keep my own council. But I’ve noticed strange things about your old friend of late too, Mikamo-kun. Especially since Lady Aiko left Jurai with Lady Misaki. So if it isn’t for him, maybe you should brew up a second batch. I’m sure there are a few things we could stand to know about this project of ours.”

She hesitated, then reached up on tip-toes, kissing him on the cheek.

“Don’t work too late.” She whispered. “And if you want me, you know where to find me.”

Then she disappeared, and Mikamo sighed, dropping down onto his work stool.

“I wish I could tell you.” He muttered. “But right now, I can’t risk it. If Najya is even a bit right about Kagato, I have to know. And then… and then, if she is right, I have to find a way to get you away from here before you get hurt. If he knows we’re together, he has leverege against me. And I won’t put you in danger for anything, Washu-chan. Whatever happens, I will make sure you’re safe — and if you don’t know anything, he can’t hurt you!”

Chapter 8

Chapter Eight

“What’s this about, Mikamo-kun?”

Kagato pushed open the door of the science lab, a look of confusion and consternation on his clever features as he cast a glance around. The scientist glanced up from his work bench, pushing his notes aside as his friend entered, and offering him a smile.

“I’m sorry to be cloak and dagger with you.” He said softly. “I feel like things have been strange of late — and I can’t place why.”

“Strange?” Kagato’s eyes flickered with indecision, then he sighed, sinking down onto a vacant lab stool as he regarded his companion pensively. “You sent an urgent message that you needed to speak to me regarding the project we’ve been so engrossed in. Have you hit a problem?”

“Possibly.” Mikamo rested his chin in his hands, eying the Prince keenly. “Look, I’d rather not discuss it with you here, to be honest. Anyone might wander in and out and I know how firm you are about discretion. I don’t want you to think I’m becoming a leak, and that was the impression you gave me, the last time we spoke. If I’ve so shattered your trust in me because of the Washu situation, I’m sorry. But considering that fact…”

“I do trust you, Mikamo.” Kagato said slowly. “At least, I want to. I really do. I’m sorry. A lot is weighing on my mind at the moment.”

“Mine too.” Mikamo acknowledged, releasing the catch on the office door and pulling it open. “Will you come through? It’s quieter in here — noone will hear us, if they come in. I didn’t want to discuss this in your study, because those Knights are always flitting in and out and I really don’t trust either one of them. I don’t know why you do.”

“Because I need the information they bring me.” Kagato said lightly, nonetheless getting to his feet and obediently following his companion into the small work office that lay at the rear of the lab. Mikamo drifted over to the unit, pausing as he turned to send his friend a quizzical look.

“Tea?” He said playfully. Kagato relaxed, a humourous smile touching his lips, and he nodded his head.

“Since you’ve pulled me out of wrestling with an important political matter, I should hope so.” He bantered. “What’s on your mind, Mikamo? Please tell me you’re not so offended by my judgement on your woman that you’re going to quit my project completely.”

“No, I’m not offended by your views on Washu. I really don’t care what anyone thinks about that.” Mikamo admitted, carefully selecting two grey mugs from the shelf and pouring the hot steaming liquid into each. Casting his companion a surrepticious look, he lifted both mugs, moving them to the table and setting them down. “Here. And no, it wasn’t her I wanted to speak to you about. Although I’m grateful for your silence. If it did get out, we’d have to leave. She’s more important to me than anything else, Kagato… I won’t risk losing her a second time.”

“Then it’s in my interests to keep my silence.” Kagato said wryly, lifting the mug in a mock-toast, then taking a long deep draught. “Acknowledged.”

“Thank you.” Mikamo put his own mug to his lips, misgivings in his heart as he ingested the thick green liquid. It tasted bitter and strange on his tongue, and he fought the urge to gag, knowing that his friend was too quick not to notice if something was amiss. He set his mug aside, resting his elbows on the table.

“Kagato, we’ve been friends a long time.” He said softly. “Haven’t we?”

“Yes.” Kagato agreed, the wariness back in his eyes. “What about it? Do I spy a royal favour coming on?”

“Not exactly.” Mikamo bit his lip, gauging how much of the tea the Prince had already ingested, then, “If I asked you a question, would you tell me the true answer?”

“This almost sounds like a game of intrigue.” Surprise glittered in Kagato’s gold eyes, and there was no mistaking the faint unease in their depths. “Stop beating around the bush, Mikamo. Tell me the question and if I can answer it, I will.”

Mikamo pursed his lips, then,

“I want to know who you really are.” He said quietly. “The son of Lord Hotaru and Lady Aiko… or something else. Some*one* else. I need to know, Kagato. Because I’ve known you a long time, and I thought I knew all there was to know. But now… I really don’t know any more.”

Kagato’s eyes widened for a moment, then faint humour sparkled in

them.

“It sounds like you’ve been doing your homework.” He said astutely, taking another sip of the tea, and then setting his mug down. “Although you’d have done better to study how to make that, Mikamo. I trust that, when you marry this wench of yours, she’ll teach you to make a decent cup of tea.”

“I doubt it. She’s worse than I am.” Mikamo reflected. Then he got a grip on himself, shaking his head.

“Well?” He pressed. “We are friends, or so you always tell me. What is the truth of it, Kagato? Because I don’t mind working for you, and putting my skills at your disposal. But I want to know exactly what I’m working towards. I want you to trust me. I’ve been under a lot of pressure lately, and it really frightened me, finding those anomalies in my blood. I at least want to know that it’s all in a good cause.”

“We are friends.” Kagato said softly. “You are probably the closest thing I have ever had to a brother, Mikamo. In many things I would trust you with my life.”

He shrugged, spreading his hands.

“You’re not mistaken.” He added. “Your suspicions have some basis. It seems my honourable mother has not always been as honourable as she now appears.”

“So you… are…”

“A bastard Prince. Yes.” Kagato’s voice was edged with a bitter cynicism. “Now you know. Does it make you think twice about our friendship?”

“No, of course not.” Mikamo frowned. “But Kagato, if you are… I mean, if you weren’t… you can’t be…”

“When I found out what my mother had hidden from me, I realised all the things that you’re trying to say, and can’t.” Kagato said quietly. “A bastard Prince can’t inherit Jurai’s throne. I know. That’s the whole reason why noone will let Yosho marry Haruna. But the difference is, everyone knows that Haruna is illegitimate. In my case, even *I* didn’t know till after you arrived on Jurai. Until after we began working with these Dark Heart crystals, in fact.”

“Which would explain your sudden obsession with the project. You’re afraid your Jurai Power won’t manifest enough to be able to make you a proper claimant, if Yosho should take off after his woman.” Mikamo realised. “That’s it, isn’t it? You’re trying to cover

the gaps in your heritage with these gems."

"That's how it began." Kagato agreed. "But it's far more than that, now. Listen, Mikamo. You keep saying that the one thing you want more than anything else is to marry this wench and disappear from the social pressures your family heap on your head. Me, I feel the opposite. I have always wanted to be where my cousin is — always. But the line is Uncle Azusa's, and I was forgotten about. It's suited me for long enough, but if people were to find out the truth of my birth… I had to take steps. I had to protect myself, and my interests. You don't think you should be prevented from marrying the woman you love, just because of boundaries of class. Well, I don't think I should be prevented from a role I would shine at, if only my Grandfather had allowed my mother and father to marry when he asked for her hand!"

Mikamo's eyes widened at the implication of his friends words.

"You really mean to be Emperor of Jurai, don't you?" He whispered. "You told me Yosho had talked you into helping him find Haruna, but that's not why you've helped him. And… and when we spoke yesterday… the Arians… you do know about them, don't you? This is all part of the plan… part of the plan I've not been allowed in on!"

Kagato's eyes narrowed.

"Yes, I will be Emperor of Jurai." He said evenly. "Yosho will find his Haruna sooner or later, and then the way will be clear for me to claim his place. Aunt Misaki has no children, and no matter what the reason for her current ill health, it suits me just fine that Uncle Haru won't be spawning any children any time soon."

Mikamo paled.

"Tell me you didn't." He murmured. "Kagato, please, tell me you didn't poison Lady Misaki and cause her to leave Jurai!"

"Of course not!" Kagato snapped, impatience in his expression. "What kind of a Prince do you think I am, Mikamo? Do you think I'd slaughter someone in cold blood like that, when it would have no benefit whatsoever? Lady Misaki's illness is nothing to do with me. The story is that my Grandfather has designs on her, I've told you that. I have no need to kill Misaki-obasama. It would be a waste of time and effort, and it would do nothing but draw attention to my actions."

"Okay." Mikamo relaxed back against his seat. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to accuse. But it's just… Kagato, you seem so desperate… and if

you're really serious about becoming King… won't your mother stop you? I mean, surely she knows who your father is. And what about him? Is he at court?"

"No. He's dead." Kagato said shortly. "And my mother wouldn't betray me. She's kept it a secret this long, for my sake. She won't let it slip now. She cares too much about how I'd react — she doesn't even know that I know my father's true identity."

"He's Arian, isn't he? Your father." Mikamo's brain was working. "That's why the Arians are here. You *are* involved with them, and you lied to me about that, too. How much else have I been left in the dark about? I've given a lot of time and energy to this project — Kagato, if you want me to work like this, I want to know everything."

"Everything?" Kagato smiled bitterly. "About my father? He was Arian. A diplomat. And a failure. He had no interest in his people or his culture. He was just a man. He didn't even put up a fight. He's gone, Mikamo. Noone can trace me back to him, so what does it matter?"

"*You* killed him." Mikamo realised. Kagato spread his hands.

"He was just a man." He repeated. "A stranger."

"You just said you weren't the kind of man to slaughter someone in cold blood!"

"I wouldn't call it that, exactly." Kagato's lips thinned and Mikamo could tell he was remembering the encounter. "In some respects, you could see it as a defence of my mother's honour. What he did… considering how old she was… it was not right, Mikamo. She was seventeen. She didn't know any better. He lured her to his bed and he got her pregnant — how would you feel, if you discovered that about your own birth?"

"I'd try and deal with it, if I could." Mikamo said quietly. "But I wouldn't kill him. That's just crazy. Insane."

"Don't look so shocked, Mikamo-kun." Kagato shook his head admonishingly. "What do you think would happen to mother or I if it became common knowledge? Grandfather would kill her, or exile her, or disgrace her beyond belief. And as for me… his existance stood in my way. So long as he was alive to claim he was my father, the risk of exposure was all too great."

"But to kill him!"

"Are you telling me that if the life of one of your kin stood between

you and your woman, you wouldn't resort to desperate measures, too?"

"I already am. I'm eloping with Washu, when the time comes." Mikamo said softly, horror in his blue eyes. "But I wouldn't shed blood over it. Kagato, that's not the kind of man I am. Even if he was just a stranger to you — how can I sit here and accept you calmly telling me that he wasn't worth anything and that it didn't matter? Of course it matters! You slew a man — that's murder! And worse, he was kin to you! Blood family!"

"Masaru said you wouldn't understand." Kagato looked pained, his hand absently going to his belt as he pulled his sword from his sheath, holding it up pensively before him. "I wanted him to be wrong, Mikamo. You are my friend. I trust you. I need to be able to — what you know now could destroy me. Would you do that, to an old friend?"

"Kagato…"

Mikamo eyed the blade in consternation, noting the dirty whiteness of the blade, and he shook his head. "Is it worth all this? The gems? Everything? I've seen your sword enough times to know that something has changed. It's got darker. Tarnished. I can't imagine that you want to follow this path. That you *wan*t to kill people, just to grab power?"

"Power and influence are the two things I've never had, but always wanted." Kagato sighed, sheathing his weapon once more. "It's not easy, being the Shadow Prince of Jurai."

"You've always made it such a game!"

"Yes, but then I found out who I was, and it made it serious." Kagato said darkly. "Listen to me, Mikamo. You've seen my fool cousin. You know what a puppet he is — how he never has a thought in his head himself about how to run this planet and keep it all in hand. All he thinks of are his woman and doing as he's told. When he's Emperor, this world will fall apart. He won't be able to hold it together. Do you doubt that I have better skill to do all the things he cannot? Do you think I'd be such a poor King, if it were to come to me?"

"No, not if you were the man I grew up knowing." Mikamo shook his head. "Even Prince Yosho himself has said it to me — that you could be a better King, if you tried. But not this way, Kagato. Not through murder and intrigue. You've killed a man — doesn't it bother you even a little bit?"

“No.” Kagato shook his head. “I was angry, when I met him. Angry at him for compromising my position. You can’t understand it — you’ve always known you were your father’s son. You look like him, in every respect! Well, I look like my father too, and that’s a curse that has hung over my head my whole life. Now I know who I am, is it wrong for me to exploit what I can? I’m a bastard Prince. I can’t muster the pure Jurai power inside of me as well as my cousin, because of that fact. I have to look to other ends if I’m ever going to be King. Don’t you think it would be for the benefit of Jurai, if I were to manage that? Isn’t that what we’ve been working towards? Hell, Mikamo, do you truly think that Yosho has it in his pure, untainted blood to rule this godforsaken planet?”

“I’m a Seniwan. Such things don’t matter to me.” Mikamo said, his heart heavy and his expression troubled. “But I’m your friend, and that does. I should have made the connections sooner. I should have seen that there was more to this… more than you’d told me.”

“I had contemplated telling you.” Kagato admitted, draining the last of his tea as he did so. “Of all people, Mikamo, I wanted you to understand everything. Know everything. You truly are the only one I trust… and I didn’t want it to be a rift between us. Yes, there are desperate acts and desperate thoughts. But it’s not so bad as you think it is. I’m learning to harness my own blood magic. I’ll use it to be strong and then I’ll be able to rule Jurai as King after the death of my Grandfather and my Uncle. I will be Jurai’s heir and noone need know about the sordid secret my mother’s hushed up for years. Noone will question my magic, when they see how strong I’ve become.”

“And the blood on your sword? What of that?”

“What of it?” Kagato shook his head. “All wars have casualties. You’ve been at the Academy too long, my friend. You don’t realise that power struggles still bring forth blood. I had no choice but to eliminate him.”

Mikamo sat silent for a moment, digesting all the things he’d heard.

“I want to believe that this isn’t my friend speaking.” He said at length. “And that the things you’ve done have been under the bewitchment of these Arians who’ve infiltrated Jurai. But I… I don’t know if I do. I’m starting to think that this *is* your will, Kagato. And it upsets me. I never thought you capable of this.”

Kagato’s eyes flickered with sadness for a moment, then they became steely, and the Prince shook his head.

“I have nothing to feel guilt for.” He said softly. “The question is,

Mikamo, what will you do now? I confess your interrogation tactics must have been spot on this evening… I didn't mean to give you quite so much information. But the fact remains — now you know the truth. How will you act?"

Mikamo frowned, burying his head in his hands. He rubbed his temples, fighting it out with himself inside.

"I don't want to betray my friend." He said slowly.

"Then don't." Kagato said evenly. "There's no reason for you to. You're a Seniwan, as you said. Jurai's politics are not for you to intervene in."

"Who is Masaru, exactly?" Mikamo raised his gaze, and Kagato frowned.

"Masaru?"

"You said Masaru told you I wouldn't understand." Mikamo reminded him. "Is he one of the Arians who you've been talking to? That strange man with his little girl, who was watching me return to my quarters the other night?"

"I didn't realise I let his name slip." Kagato looked troubled. Mikamo raised an eyebrow.

"Are you afraid of him, then?"

"No. Not afraid." Kagato shook his head, a glimmer of anger in his amber eyes, and for the first time, Mikamo was aware of the hatred and darkness that truly burned inside his friend's heart. "But I need him, Mikamo. Masaru is a mage of Airai — the mage of the Saotome family, the clan my pathetic blood-father chose to turn his back on. Without Masaru's help, I may never fully master the other side of my heritage. If I can combine the magic of Airai and the magic of Jurai, I will be unstoppable. But I lack training and knowhow."

"So he's here to teach you, is that right?" Mikamo's voice shook with derision, as he slowly shook his head. "Who are you becoming, Kagato? What will you do to ensure you have this magic inside of you — enough magic to be accepted as a claimant to Jurai's throne? Do you really think that such a path will lead to your success?"

"I will do whatever it takes to get where I want to be." Kagato said simply. "With as little trouble as possible. So you see, it isn't in your interests to betray me. The more people who know, the more trouble there'll be. Masaru will be angry, and I can't risk that at the moment. He'll go back to Airai before I'm ready, and that would be a shame.

No, right now you can help me best by pretending we didn't have this conversation at all. He already mistrusts you, and he doesn't approve of how much faith I have in you. I believe in the ties of friendship, Mikamo. Am I wrong to do so?"

Mikamo bit his lip, his heart skipping a beat in his chest as he surveyed his friend. Outwardly he seemed as he ever had been, a wry smile on his lips, an energetic, lively sparkle in the amber eyes that so betrayed his tainted heritage. But there was something else he saw now, too. The determined set of his jaw, and in the depths of that golden gaze a hardness that he had never noticed in the past. Absently he wondered if it had even been there, or if Airai's magic had drawn a true demon out of his friend's desperate soul. Najya's words about Saotome blood came to him once more, and his frown deepened.

"I have always valued our friendship, Kagato." He said slowly. "I have always relished your wit and spirit, and your ability to make the most dull occasion seem entertaining. You are without a doubt one of the most intelligent people I know, and intelligent company in my mind is the best kind there is."

"Then I have nothing to fear, Mikamo?" Kagato's eyes flickered. "After all, as you said, you are of Seniwan birth. You and your wench, you're not involved in this. You'll leave. It will be past. And I would never ask you to spill blood on my account. Not even as Emperor of Jurai."

"No, but what you are asking me to do is be complicit in your plans to do so." Mikamo gathered his thoughts, his heart heavy as he realised what he must do. "Seniwa and Jurai are political allies, and even if I've not kept abreast of such things, if things happen on Jurai, then they will impact on Seniwa in some way or another. And this man — this Masaru — I don't have any magic ability or extra senses, but I can see the evil that emanates from him as clearly as I can see your face. He's a dangerous man whose ambitions will only be sated by blood. Kagato, listen to me. As my friend, I do not want to betray you. But if you keep harbouring enemies of Jurai in your midst, and continue to rise dark spirits inside of you, I won't have any choice. I'll have to go to Shigure-heika and tell him what I know. Even if it means exile for me — even if it means trouble for you. I can't continue working on something that's going to cause the death of innocent people. Power struggles may be nothing to you, but every life is important to me. Every single one… I can't just stand back and be a part of that happening."

Kagato did not reply for a moment, and Mikamo eyed him keenly,

trying to read the expression on the Prince's face.

At length, Kagato got to his feet.

"We will speak again." He said quietly. "Do not speak to my Grandfather yet. We will discuss this once again, Mikamo, when I am less tired and better aware of my own wits. I want you to understand, my friend."

"I don't think I'll change my mind, Kagato." Mikamo shook his head impatiently. Kagato raised his gaze, and despite himself, a cold chill shot through Mikamo's soul at the emptiness he saw there. The Prince shrugged.

"For your own sake, I hope thats not the case." He said softly, and Mikamo could hear the regret in his tones. Then the Prince was gone, door swinging shut behind him, and Mikamo sighed, closing his eyes as he fought to get his emotions under control.

"Did he threaten me?" He murmured. "Was that what he was saying — that if I don't keep his secrets — or if he thinks I'm a threat, he'll eliminate me like he did his father? Is this really the boy I grew up so close to — the man whose friendship I value more than any other man I've ever met? I understand his desperation, and I would like to believe his soul has been afflicted by this Masaru and his evil ways. But somehow… I don't know. Perhaps I was wrong to use the serum, after all. Maybe there are things I'd have been better off not knowing."

He got to his feet, scooping up the two mugs and rinsing them absently under the tap, setting them down to drain. He moved to leave the office, but then he hesitated, shaking his head.

"He said we'd talk again." He murmured. "So whatever happens, I have some time. Whether the Emperor would even believe me is doubtful — and it would hurt Lady Aiko so much to make accusations, especially when the only proof I have is my own suspicion and what Kagato himself has told me. It's his word against mine and I'm a foreigner here. Which means I have three choices. I can backtrack on what I said and tell him I'll keep his secrets. That's what I should have done, anyway — if only I hadn't had to drink that wretched goo as well, maybe I'd have been more circumspect. Even if I do backtrack now, he'll suspect me and it will be difficult. And the problem is, I *don't* intend to keep it a secret. If Kagato doesn't send away Masaru, and if he doesn't get to grips with this whole thing, I will have to see the Emperor. Or at the very least, Lord Azusa. It's too big a matter to be concealed. So that brings me to the second option. I can tell

someone and hope they believe me without proof. Or I can leave Jurai, here and now, and never return to this planet again. Which I'd do, in a heartbeat, if it wasn't for Washu. If I took her with me, she'd want to know why. And if I told her, she'd be in danger too. But I know I couldn't leave her behind… so I'm left with my dilemma. How do I resolve this — and *can* I betray my friend, after so many years?"

He frowned, pulling open the drawer of the desk and extracting the report on his bloodwork, setting it down on the unit before him.

"Time to start thinking about proof." He murmured. "Yesterday, when Kagato was here, we did basic transferances of his magic to those gems. We worked long and hard on it, when Najya and Washu were occupied with other things. Najya's been preoccupied enough with these Arians, so like as not she doesn't realise how far this project has gone. And hopefully, I've kept Washu out of it. But… even so…"

He sighed, pulling some clean paper from the pad and beginning to jot down notes in his careful, concise shorthand Seniwan script. For an hour or maybe two, he wrote solidly, then he sat back, glancing at the several sheets with a grim smile.

"I can't believe I'm thinking this way, but I have to be prepared for all eventualities." He said softly, getting to his feet and moving to the safe in the furthest corner of the lab as he keyed in the combination, opening the first and then the inner door as he reached in for the silvery containment capsule that kept the gems a prisoner. "If something happens to me — in the unlikely event that that Arian mage decides to make it personal, I want these away from Kagato's hands. He doesn't read Seniwan, but Washu does. And if something happens to me, she'll need to know everything, else she might be in danger too. I don't fear Kagato, but from what Najya said, Masaru and his daughter are threats. I won't let my fiancee be hurt, whatever else happens."

He hesitated, then slid the silver capsule into his pocket. Carefully he collected together his sheets of notepaper, sliding them into a ready wallet and putting them inside the drawer of his desk, locking it firmly. He glanced at the key, then pocketed that also, turning to leave the lab. Everything seemed in order, quiet and peaceful, and he sighed, shaking his head slowly as he considered the direction in which his mind was moving.

"Najya was right. Noone is safe while those gems are in dangerous hands." He murmured. "Even if I can believe Kagato is being manipulated, he still shouldn't be able to use them. And as a bastard

Prince of Jurai — surely he's right. Surely he can't use Jurai's power because of the broken link. Why else would Jurai be so concerned with legitimate, unbroken family bonds in their royal line? That being said, could he maintain this planet as Emperor, anyway? Can he really substitute dark arts for Jurai's pure power? The logic of it eludes me… even as a scientist, I see the flaws in his hypothesis. And I'm not going to let my friend destroy himself any further. Not if I can help it."

So, Mikamo *was* going to be a problem.

As Kagato returned to his own quarters, he bit his lip, running over the conversation in his mind as he did so. A sudden flash of temper flooded through him and he kicked out at the wall, anger sparking in his amber eyes as he remembered his friend's impassioned remarks.

"Damn you, Mikamo." He muttered. "And damn my own tongue. Why did I want so badly to tell him? I never intended on giving him half that information. But it seemed to just pour from me. Like…"

He frowned, shaking his head as if to clear it. The blackness seemed to loom in around him and he quickened his pace, hurrying to reach his chambers and the safety and seclusion they offered him.

"I told you that he wouldn't be won over."

Masaru's voice echoed out of the darkness and he jumped, swinging around to face the ethereal haze of the mage's dark magic.

"I didn't ask you." He snapped.

"Temper." Masaru looked faintly amused. He cast a glance at his companion, then he shook his head slowly, pursing his lips.

"You seek to be the Emperor of Jurai, and yet you are so unguarded." He said admonishingly. "I'm almost ashamed of you, Kagato-dono. I thought you were known for your discretion."

"What are you talking about, discretion?" Kagato's eyes widened and he grabbed the mage by the arm, pulling him into the seclusion of the empty study as he banged on the light. "*Anyone* could have heard you!"

"I don't care." Masaru flicked his fingers carelessly. "I don't bother about eavesdroppers. Those that know too much don't live long enough to cause me trouble."

His eyes narrowed.

"Are you as committed to this as that?"

“Masaru, it’s late. I want to sleep.”

“I’m sure you do.” Masaru said derisively. “You have the taint of a spell about you tonight, my Prince. What have you been eating?”

“A… spell?” Kagato blinked, staring up at him uncertainly. “That’s stupid. I’ve been with Mikamo. What kind of magic do you suppose they practice on Seniwa?”

“You are a fool.” Masaru said disparagingly. “Don’t doubt what I can see and sense. Your reactions, your eyes — there is more than one way to hex someone. You’ve ingested something… a drug can be as potent as any magic potion, if used to the best of its abilities.”

“A drug?” Kagato’s eyes widened with shock, then anger as he registered the implications of his companion’s words. “You’re saying *Mikamo* drugged me? That I told him as much as I did because of that?”

“And you think to call yourself a future King.” Masaru snorted. “You must be more astute. Kings have enemies. Powerful men are always at risk.”

“Then where’s Ramia? I thought you didn’t let her out of your sight.” Kagato shot back. Masaru smiled, his golden eyes glinting eerily in the artificial light of the study lamps.

“She’s sleeping. She needs to rest sometimes, and she’s only young.” He said softly. “I have put a protective charm on her chamber. Noone will enter. I am not so incautious as you.”

Kagato sank down into his seat, indignation glittering in his golden eyes.

“So he has already betrayed me, then?” He murmured. “He didn’t seek to ask me, as a friend, but to expose me, as a potential enemy. You were right after all, Masaru. He *has* turned against me, even as I thought he might be the one person on this planet who would understand. It’s that damn woman — it must be. Something about that Kii witch has turned his senses and he’s blind to all loyalty and reason because of it.”

“You should listen to me more clearly.” Masaru said simply. “I’m your kin. The Mage of your clan. My power reaches over all of you. And you cannot put faith in those outside of that bond. You are not like him — you are not the same as the soulless technophiles that swarm all over Seniwa. He is insignificant… I don’t understand why it bothers you so much to kill him.”

“Because Mikamo is like my elder brother.” Kagato snapped, wheeling on his companion in his fury.

“And he has betrayed you? Clearly he doesn’t think that way.” Masaru said smoothly. “Does he?”

“Damn you, I don’t know.” Kagato rubbed his temples. “My head feels strange. Has he poisoned me too, Masaru? I can’t explain it, but I feel on edge and… and strange.”

“It’s very hard to kill someone with Arian blood. I thought you knew that.”

“Yes, but my magic isn’t at its peak yet.”

“It’s still enough to ward against chemicals such as this.” Masaru assured him. “Your friend’s drug is not going to end your life. But with the information he now has… do you think you can let *him* live?”

“I said we’d discuss it again.” Kagato said pensively. Masaru shook his head.

“He’s already made up his mind.” He said quietly. “You know that he has. Why else did he drug you? He’s conspiring against you. He’s a friend of Najya Akara, isn’t he? I told you not to underestimate her threat. He’s working for her — it’s clear as day where he’s placed his loyalties. He’s an enemy of the Saotome now — he’s made his choice. Now it’s up to you — do you want this badly enough to act?”

Kagato was silent for a moment, then he raised his gaze to the other man’s.

“I told you. Whatever it takes.” He said, no trace of emotion in his voice. “So long as it can’t be traced back to me.”

“Mage-magic has many different facets and forms.” Masaru looked pleased at the prospect of bloodshed. “Tell me, my Prince, did you not mention erratic behaviour on your friend’s part? Indiscretion — sleepless nights? And other things besides? Anomalies… such things as that?”

“Yes.” Kagato’s expression became thoughtful and he nodded. “You’re saying there’s some way we can use this?”

“I need something that belongs to Professor Niwase. That’s all.” Masaru agreed, a predatorial glint entering his golden gaze.

“Something of Mikamo’s?” Kagato looked startled, then he smiled, a cold, strange smile as he nodded his head again. He got to his feet, moving across the study and pulling open the door of a cabinet as he

extracted the thing he was looking for.

“Whenever a foreign native enters Jurai to work, he has to secure his residency here with a sample of genetic material.” He said quietly. “Mikamo works for me, so I have his genetic ident here in my study. I never gave it a second thought, but are you truly saying that all you need is this and that’ll be an end to it?”

“Yes.” Masaru held out a gloved hand for the card, taking it and glancing at it. His lips twitched into a smile. “Oh, this will do nicely. Your friend won’t bother you too much longer, Kagato. With this I can snare his soul, and drive him out of his wits. You won’t need to take Mikamo’s life, that I promise you. By the time I’m done with him, the good professor will relinquish it of his own accord.”

His smile widened, and Kagato was aware of the creeping coldness in his golden eyes.

“Willingly.”

Chapter 9

Chapter Nine

He was trapped in the darkness once again.

Mikamo's eyes snapped open, fear and confusion coursing through his body as he drew a deep breath of air into his lungs, struggling to calm down. Images danced and swam through his thoughts, disorientating him further and he bit his lip, rubbing his temples as he fought to make them go away.

Inwardly he cursed himself for having ingested any of the toxic hallucinogenic potion, but as he threw back his blankets, getting to his feet, a cavalcade of emotions flooded through him, overwhelming his senses completely and he stumbled to his knees, frightened and bewildered by the sudden nature of the onslaught.

He closed his eyes, fighting to block the sensations out, but as he did so, two bright golden eyes pierced through his mind, cold hatred glittering in their depths. He let out a gasp, as more pictures flooded through him, and from somewhere in the blackness he was certain that he could feel a hand around his throat, causing him to choke and gag as he struggled to draw in air. He let out a stifled yell, pushing back against his invisible assailant, but his hands passed cleanly through thin air and he almost overbalanced, gripping the wall as he tried to keep himself from falling headlong. He opened his eyes, glancing around him in a wild panic, but there was noone there.

He dragged himself to his feet, struggling to make sense of what was happening. Those gold eyes still burned through his memory and he frowned, clenching his fists. Maybe it was the hallucinogen — he couldn't be sure, and his brain was not cooperating enough to answer any of his questions. But somehow, with that evil gaze watching over him, Mikamo knew that it was something more sinister. Someone, somewhere was making his move.

"Kagato?" He whispered hoarsely. "What are you trying to do to me? Make me crazy? Have you given up so easily on talking me round, then? Was I wrong not to be afraid of you?"

A wave of nausea and panic washed over him and he gripped onto the windowsill as a involuntary shudder ran down his spine. As he did so, new pictures began to form in his minds eye, and terror pierced his

very heart as he registered what they were.

“Washu.” He murmured, tears in his blue eyes. “What are you doing to her, you monster? Who are you… leave her alone!”

His cries fell on deaf ears, however, and even as the grotesque hallucinations played themselves out across his senses, Mikamo knew that they weren’t real. In the back of his mind he had the faint sensation that he was being poisoned in a way beyond his understanding or control, but the next moment this was forgotten as another barrage of dark emotions washed over him. He swallowed hard, sweating profusely as the walls of his chamber began to close in around him and as the first rays of the dawn began to glimmer through his window, he remembered Najya’s words about the Arian sun and the demon that had been reflected in the eyes of the Saotome.

“The demon has come to claim me, too.” He whispered. “Oh, what am I saying? Do I believe in demons now? But what else could it be? This is dark magic… something… and I can’t control it! I can’t fight it off — I don’t know how. I need… I need Najya. She’ll help me… if only I can find my way out of this room!”

He took several deep breaths, fighting to calm himself, but it was to no avail, and in the end he emitted a yell of frustration, shoving open the door of his chamber and hurrying down the corridor towards the main exit. As he did so, he was certain he could hear footsteps behind him and he turned, but there was nothing there and a chill wind whipped through him as he felt the tight, dark grip on his heart tighten once again. Fear flooded through him as he contemplated whether or not he could live through this episode, but it was soon replaced by a greater fear as the wave of black emotions ran across his mind once more.

“I can’t fight this. I can’t bear this.” He whispered. “But I must… find Najya. I must…”

He faltered, wetting his lips as he pushed open the guesthouse door like a man possessed, hastening towards the path that led to the institute. Sinister laughter echoed in his ears, as if someone was watching and enjoying his every panicked move and rage flooded over him, tension flickering across his body as he swung madly around, fists clenched for a fight with his invisible opponant. Again, there was noone there, but somehow this came as no comfort and Mikamo swallowed hard, returning his attention to the task at hand.

“Mikamo?”

A voice from the shadows made him start and he tensed again, his

eyes wild and fearful as he scanned the landscape for any sign of the speaker.

“Mikamo, what on earth is wrong with you?”

It was Najya’s voice, and something in her familiar tones calmed his immediate panic as the Arian scientist stepped out of the trees, eying him with a mixture of concern and bewilderment. “It’s barely dawn — Washu’s probably sleeping. And what… what’s wrong with you, Mikamo? What have you done? I can smell the taint of Saotome magic on you from here — what have you let that Prince do to you?”

“Najya.” Mikamo stumbled forwards, grabbing her by the hands as he raised his desperate gaze to hers. “They’re inside me. Somehow. I can’t…”

Najya’s eyes became grave, and she shook her head.

“You’ve been cursed.” She realised softly. “You confronted Kagato about our suspicions, didn’t you? Foolish, Mikamo! He’s a dangerous man playing dangerous games, and this is the result. This is Masaru’s magic — I can tell just by touching you what it is that courses through you. I’m not strong enough to break it on my own. I don’t even know if Father could, even if I was able to bring him here or take you to see him. Mikamo, you have to fight against his delusions. Whatever he’s making you see or feel — it isn’t reality. They hex people’s souls and make them suffer, but I know you’re strong and I know you can fight this.”

“You won’t help me?” Incredulation flared in Mikamo’s blue eyes and he released his grip on her, pushing her away from him hard enough that she tripped over her feet, falling heavily against one of the nearby trees. Mikamo advanced on her, anger and desperation in his expression as he did so, and as he moved closer, he was aware of a flicker of fear in his companion’s eyes.

“Mikamo, stop this. You’re not acting right.” She said softly. “If I could help you, you know I would. But you need to calm down. If you can, maybe I… maybe there’s something I can do. But…”

Mikamo stared at her for a moment, and then somewhere in the haze of his drowning emotions he registered where he was and what he had done. As his friend struggled to her feet, he realised the force of his shove had severely winded her, and a faint trickle of blood ran across her brow, indicating that she had struck her head. He let out a cry of dismay, stepping back as fear surged anew inside of him.

“What am I?” He whispered. “For a minute there, I wanted to kill

you."

"That's because it's Masaru's work. He hates me… it's not your will and I'm not angry." Najya said carefully. "But Mikamo, you need to go back to your chamber. Go back, try to rest, try to block all of this out. Masaru's spell depends on delusion… you're playing into his hands the more you let his pictures upset your mind."

Mikamo drew a shaky breath into his lungs, struggling to understand his friend's words. At length he groaned, burying his head in his hands as the despair and hopelessness washed through him once again.

"Mikamo?"

"Get Washu." Mikamo made up his mind, raising his gaze to his colleague. "Please, Najya. Washu."

"But I…"

"Tell her to meet me… meet me at our special place." Mikamo continued, every word burning through him as he felt like he was losing himself in dark hallucinations. With a desperate attempt he pushed back against it, struggling to focus on what he was saying. "Tell her to… to hurry. I need… to talk to her. Something… important."

"Something about Kagato?" Najya asked sharply, but Mikamo didn't answer. Instead he grabbed her once more by the hands, meeting her hesitant gaze with an intense, searching one of his own.

"Please." He echoed. "Washu. Tell her."

Then, as the impulse to strike out at her surged through him again, he pulled away, turning on his heel and hurrying away into the darkness. From somewhere far behind him he could hear Najya's voice, calling his name, but he paid it no heed, knowing that if he spent any more time in the scientist's company, he would probably hurt her in some further way.

"I'm a puppet." he realised, as in the midst of his spinning thoughts one coherent moment came to him. "But I won't hurt Najya. I won't! And Washu — I have to make Washu leave this place. Whatever is happening to me, I have to make her realise that she could be in danger, too. I won't let them do this to her. I *won't* let them hurt her!"

"You're up early this morning, my son."

Kagato glanced up from the desk in his study, closing the drawer with a hurried click as he registered his mother's presence in the doorway. He offered her a faint smile, gesturing for her to come in and she did so, perching neatly on one of his empty chairs as she cast him a pensive glance.

"You look tired and troubled. Perhaps I should amend my comment and suggest you've been up late, instead." She said at length. "Have you not yet been to bed, Kagato?"

"Why the sudden motherly concern, Okaa-sama?" Kagato rested his arms on the desk, meeting his mother's curious gaze with an impassive one of his own. "I've been working, and sleep gets in the way of that. I've had a lot going on lately. Many things are going well in my scientific research program, but a few things needed to be ironed out. And what about you? This is early for you to be wandering the halls too, isn't it?"

"Perhaps, but I had an uneasy night." Aiko admitted. "Maybe I could feel your preoccupation too, my son. You certainly seem to have the weight of the world on your shoulders today."

"No, not the world. Just Jurai, or so it seems." Kagato rubbed his temples. "I am tired, Mother. But I won't sleep until this is finished. It's important to me… I have to make sure it's all done right."

"You know, more and more you seem to plough yourself into this scientific program of yours." Aiko balanced her chin in her hands, tilting her head as she observed him. "That and your magical training, too. I've noticed you practicing with your sword a lot of late, my son — it surprised me to see you suddenly so diligent with Jurai's power. I always thought that was Yosho's domain. Not yours."

"Well, there are some things every Prince needs to learn, even for his own protection." Kagato said candidly. "Mother, is it true that Lady Misaki left Jurai because Grandfather was poisoning her?"

Aiko's eyes opened wide with alarm at this, then understanding flickered across her features.

"You seek to protect yourself because you fear you might also be his target?" She murmured. Kagato nodded.

"You and I both know that Grandfather may be a revered Emperor, but he's also a paranoid man with a nasty temper and an ability to make people disappear." He said quietly. "I don't want to disappear. That's all."

"I don't know what Father wants with Misaki and that's the truth."

Aiko admitted. “And I swore not to discuss it, even with you. I’m sorry, my son. The less you know of these machinations the better. Suffice it to say that the whole business made me very angry… but I can’t talk about it any more than that.”

“You believe he did try to hurt her. I can tell.” Kagato mused. Aiko spread her hands.

“As I said, it made me very angry.” She said softly, and for a moment a glimmer of something flickered through her ruby-red eyes. Kagato stared at her as he registered what it was he was seeing, and at his sudden change in expression she frowned, raising an questioning eyebrow.

“Kagato?” She murmured. “Something’s wrong?”

“No.” Kagato sighed, rubbing his temples. “Last night I was silly enough to get close to something in the lab and I think it might have affected me, that’s all. I daren’t leave here or go to sleep — when I close my eyes, I’m haunted by strange images, and it hasn’t worn off completely yet. It will, if I’m patient… but I think it’s still deluding my senses just a little.”

“You shouldn’t use yourself as a human guinea pig, my son.” Aiko chided, and Kagato shook his head.

“Believe me, it wasn’t on purpose.” He said bitterly. “I ingested it by accident. I wouldn’t have chosen to.”

“Well, you should be careful.” Aiko told him gently, reaching out her hand to cover his as she offered him a warm, playful smile. “Science is all very well, but it’s no good if you drive yourself to madness over it.”

As her fingers touched his, Kagato felt a faint flicker of energy stir beneath her skin, and he bit his lip, fighting to return her smile as she got to her feet.

“Get some sleep, and I think I’ll do the same.” She advised. “Surely whatever ails you will work through your system more quickly that way, and if not, you should see a palace physician. You don’t need to lock yourself away in here to work if you’re not feeling well, Kagato — remember, you and I are not the ones on whose heads fall the burden of power.”

With that she was gone, the door swinging shut behind her, and Kagato frowned, holding his hand up in front of his face as he contemplated what he had felt.

“A hallucination?” he murmured. “The final after-effects of whatever was in Mikamo’s foul brew?”

He pondered this for a moment, then he sighed, shaking his head as he banged his hand down on the desk in frustration.

“I didn’t imagine it.” He muttered. “I’ve just been blind — stupid. That’s all. I’ve not even thought about things, but…”

He bit his lip as he considered the implications.

“The magic Masaru helps me wake makes me more aware of other people and the power they hold within their hearts.” He murmured. “I knew that would happen — he told me as much himself. But that I should have missed this up until now… how could I be so naive? Everyone at court knows that the seers predicted the Jurai power in Grandmother’s last pregnancy — before Uncle Haru and mother were born, everyone expected a second Prince with Jurai’s magic flowing through his veins. Because Uncle Haru failed, everyone assumed the seers were wrong. They didn’t take into account the other possibility. That the magic might not have risen in my Uncle at all. It might have been… my mother?”

He rubbed his temples, a mixture of thoughts running through his mind as he digested this.

“Mother hates responsibility, so maybe she’s just hidden it all these years.” He muttered. “But I’m illegitimate, and I still inherited enough of the power to be able to wake it inside of me. Would it have not passed to me, if Mother was without? I don’t know. I don’t understand Tsunami’s magic any more from all of this work we’ve done than I did before. But what if I’m right? What if Mother does have Jurai’s Power and what’s more, what if she chooses to use it? I’ve been so easily dismissing Uncle Haru’s family from my line of sight… but what if the real threat is right here under my own nose? What if my *Mother* could stand between me and my claim to Jurai’s throne?”

He swallowed hard, feeling sick at the idea, and he got to his feet, moving across to the window to let in some fresh air.

“Last night I let Masaru convince me to hex my closest friend.” He muttered, resting his head against the cool glass as the gentle breeze teased at his hair. “All for this one goal… I let him convince me. But if Mother has Jurai’s power, killing Mikamo would be in vain. Telling him anything would have been foolish. I’ve murdered my friend in cold blood and for what? Nothing. And yet…”

He faltered, shaking his head.

“Could I really eliminate Mother, if the time came?” He wondered. “Could I go that far, to become King of Jurai? I didn’t think I was capable of killing a friend until today, but even now Masaru’s spell is working its way through Mikamo’s heart, and I know there’s no way back. But even considering that… considering everything… could I kill my own mother? If she truly chose to stand in my way, could I really do such a thing in pursuit of the Crown of Jurai?”

“Mikamo?”

Washu mounted the uneven, rocky path with some difficulty, pulling her cloak more tightly around her shoulders as she battled against the buffetting wind that seemed determined to push her back the way she’d come. As she navigated her way between a group of tall, ranging trees, a branch caught in her hairtie, pulling it loose and sending her thick waves of hair floating free around her face. Gritting her teeth in determination, she pushed on, leaving the cloth fluttering in the breeze behind her.

“Mikamo!” She exclaimed, scanning the horizon for any sign of her paramour. “Where are you? Why did you call me out here? What’s going on… Mikamo, what do you want to tell me?”

“Washu?”

As she reached the flat, jagged ledge, she saw him, standing some feet away as he turned to face the sound of her voice. She hurried towards him, grabbing him anxiously by the hand as she met his gaze with hers.

“Mikamo, what’s the matter?” She asked softly. “You sounded frightened… agitated. What’s wrong? You know you can tell me. You can trust me… you know that you can.”

“Washu-chan.” Mikamo ran tragic eyes over her face, reaching his free hand up to touch her cheek. “You know that I love you, don’t you?”

“Of course I do!” Washu looked startled. “Why do you even need to ask?”

She bit her lip, fighting the lump in her throat.

“Is it your family? Have they found out… what we plan to do?”

“My family?” Mikamo looked blank. Then he shook his head. “No… no. Not them. Nothing at home. Nothing…”

He trailed off, pulling his hand absently from her grip and running it through his thick fair hair. With a start Washu noticed how pale and haggard her fiance looked and she swallowed hard.

“What’s happened?” She whispered.

“I can’t listen to them any more. I can’t keep seeing them.” Mikamo seemed agitated, and Washu wondered if he was still aware of her company. His eyes seemed to cloud over for a moment, then he turned his head sharply, making her jump. “I wanted you to understand… I tried to fight them. But they won’t go away… they won’t leave me.”

“What won’t leave you, Mika-chan?” Gently Washu took his cold hand in hers once more, squeezing it reassuringly. “Is someone trying to hurt you? Tell me.”

Sparks of energy flickered from the ends of her fingers.

“You know I’ll help if you need me. I won’t let you down.”

“You can’t stop them. Noone can.” Mikamo looked frightened and he shook his head. “No, Washu! Don’t you see? I won’t have them hurt you… I won’t let them take you too!”

“Who?” Washu exclaimed. “Mikamo, you’re not making any sense!”

“I can’t think… can’t think any more.” Mikamo’s agitation was growing and he gripped at his hair, pulling it loose from it’s normally neat queue as he did so. “I’ve tried, Washu. I really have.”

“Talk to me, then.” Washu emplored, leading him over to a fallen tree trunk and coaxing him to sit down. She perched herself next to him, not loosing her grip on his hand. “Start at the beginning and tell me what’s wrong. Maybe I can help. Or maybe someone else can. We have a lot of protection here on Jurai — you know that if someone threatens our work that the military are likely to get involved. All you have to do is tell me and I’ll make sure that help comes. Just tell me, Mika-chan. Whoever it is… we’ll stop them.”

“It’s too late to stop them.” The tension seemed to seep from Mikamo’s body at this, and he raised hopeless eyes to her concerned green ones. “I love you so much, Washu-chan. I always have. I want you to know that… I need to know you love me too.”

“Of course I do.” Washu’s voice softened. “Since we first worked together, you know that. No matter what your parents said about you seeing me — I’ve loved you since then and I still love you now. And we’ll face whatever it is together, I promise we will. Don’t think I’d abandon you — we’re a team and if you’re in some kind of trouble, I

want to help."

"I won't have you hurt." Mikamo repeated, pain in his eyes. "I won't."

"Just tell me." Washu murmured. "And let me be the judge for myself."

She paused, then,

"Is this something to do with Prince Kagato?"

Mikamo was silent for a moment, and Washu waited, curbing her impatience as her companion struggled to gather his thoughts.

"Witchcraft." He murmured at length. "The gems… demons… sent from the darkness itself. They can't be stopped, Washu… they'll come in the night and the day as well. I see them everywhere… they want to hurt me and hurt all of us. We've meddled in magic we don't understand and we're all doomed… all of us. Only I can't let them hurt you… not you, Washu-chan. Not you."

Tears glittered on his lashes, and Washu's heart lurched in her chest as she registered the flicker of madness in her companion's gaze. She muttered a curse in her native tongue, standing and pulling him to his feet.

"There are no demons in the gems, Mika-chan." She murmured. "Just complex, powerful magic. You're tired — you work too hard and the Prince asks too much of you. You need to rest, that's all."

"Rest?" Mikamo shook his head. "I can't. You aren't listening. I don't have… I can't. Dammit, I can't even say the things I want to say!"

He clenched his fists, beating them against the ground in his frustration, and Washu clung to him more tightly, frightened by his erratic behaviour. For a moment he seemed almost lucid, as if he was fighting tooth and nail against something that stirred inside of him. Tears welled in his blue eyes and Washu found them mirrored in her own as she watched his battle with his wits.

"Oh Mikamo." She murmured. "Let me help you. Tell me how to help you."

Mikamo shook his head, meeting her gaze with a wild, hopeless one of his own.

"It's too late." He said quietly, and for the briefest of instants, Washu thought he had calmed. "I was afraid… they knew. They

took… I'm not… me. And I can't… fight it. They want me… I'm too tired. I can't."

"Take a deep breath, and explain." Washu begged. "You're making no sense."

Mikamo swallowed hard. He fumbled in his pocket, pulling out a silver key and holding it out to her, his hand shaking. Carefully Washu took it, glancing at it in confusion.

"What's this for?"

"My notes. Read my notes… all of them." Mikamo whispered. "You'll understand… we've done a terrible thing. We've meddled… and there are forces we can't possibly control or understand. Washu, it's too late for me. They… know. They know I know and they won't let me… But you *must* understand and get away… I won't have them hurt you too. You're the one that means most to me… you know you are. I won't let them take you."

He paused, then kissed her firmly and startled, Washu did not resist, although the feel of his lips on hers was rougher and more desperate than usual. Hesitantly, she wrapped her arms around his body, but fear still flickered in her thoughts as she felt the tension rippling through him. She reached up to push his hair out of his face, fighting against her own tears as she did so.

"I love you, Washu-chan." Mikamo murmured, but she could see the melancholy in his eyes. "I always will, no matter what. Will you always love me?"

"Yes, Mikamo. No matter what, I will always love you." Washu nodded. "Though I don't understand why you need me to say it."

"I need you to promise me that you will. You always will." Mikamo's voice was unsteady, and Washu was aware once more of the desperate flicker of madness in the depths of his eyes. He was fighting it again, she realised it now. Something dark was within him, fighting for control of his mind and body, and he was battling it as hard as he could go.

"What's happened to you?" She whispered. "What have those gems done? We need to get you back to the lab… let me look at you! Maybe I can help…"

"Noone can help me now." Mikamo pressed his finger to her lips. "But listen to me. Leave this world. Leave Jurai. The magic is evil, the project is tainted. Everything is wrong and they won't rest until they've destroyed all of us. Even the Prince. We're all doomed if we

stay here. Take my advice and go back to the Academy."

"What about you?" Washu demanded. "Do you think I'm going to leave you behind again? That we're going to be split up for who knows how long? I don't think so! Not this time. I've told you before, if I'm ever going to be your wife, you need to trust me to share in your problems and face them with you!"

Mikamo gave her a strange, sad smile, and slowly he shook his head.

"I love you too much to let them hurt you too." He murmured. "I always wanted to make you my bride, Washu — whatever Mother and Father had to say. I would have done it — no matter what. Always know that. In my heart, you already were my… my wife."

"I'm not going to leave you here! Not when you're sick like this!" Washu protested. "I'm not that weak and I'm not that fickle! Mikamo, you know better than anyone what magics I possess! I'm not defenceless, and I don't run away!"

"There's nothing else you can do." Mikamo said softly. He hesitated, then took a slow step away from her. The tension seemed to flood out of his body, and resignation flickered in his blue eyes as he seemed to realise the fight was already lost.

"Live your life for me. For us. Don't let them take you down too. You're too brilliant for that. Noone else can match you at the Academy and they should be proud to have you among their alumni." He added quietly. "Don't let your Kii heritage hold you back, because you are truly the smartest and best scientist I have ever known."

"What are you saying?" Fear leapt in Washu's heart at this, and she shook her head. "Mikamo? *What are you saying*?"

"I'm saying goodbye, Washu-chan." Maybe it was a trick of the light, but Washu was sure she saw tears on her fiance's cheek. He reached a hand up to his throat, and with a decisive, sweeping gesture he pulled his pendant loose, tossing it across the ground towards her.

"My memory… so I always live with you." He added. "I can feel them coming over me again… Washu, they'll make me hurt you and I can't hurt you. Forgive me… and love me now as much as you ever did. Please. For my sake."

"Mikamo, no!" In a flash Washu realised what her companion was about to do, and she darted forward, grabbing desperately for his hand but he drew it out of her reach. "You're not yourself! You're confused — listen to yourself and stop this!"

Mikamo did not answer. Instead he sent her another sad smile, then turned his back on her. As Washu stumbled forward, he took striding steps towards the rugged edge of the mountain ledge, and then, without a moment of hesitation, he jumped.

"*No*!" Washu's scream split the sky and she blurred out of view, re-appearing just beyond the edge as she made a frantic attempt to pull her fiance back. She caught the edge of his cape, gripping it tightly in her grasp as she fought to get a better hold, but the fine fabric pulled and tore, and try as she might, she could not check his fall.

"*Mikamo*!" Panic and desperation flooded through her, paralysing her senses for a split second as she saw his pale, cloaked form sprawled motionless on the jagged rock face below. Then, steeling herself, she teleported down to the ground, approaching him slowly and trying to ignore the seeping redness of the shallow water that lapped around the edges of his body. She put a trembling finger to his throat, but there was no lifebeat and agony stabbed through her heart, followed by a surge of pure rage.

"Someone will pay for this!" She muttered viciously, tears blinding her sight as she struggled to turn the broken shape of the fallen scientist over onto his back. His face was scratched and scraped from his fall, and she touched his cheek gingerly as her grief took control of her, burying her head in his shoulder as violent sobs wracked through her.

"Mikamo." She wept. "What happened to you? What did you mean? And why *you*? Am I so much bad luck that I touch everyone around me with death? Does fate hate the idea of me being happy so much that she'll kill you rather than let me have you? Of all the men Kagato had to employ to study his stupid gems, *why did it have to be you*?"

For a while she stayed there, not caring that the edges of her coat and gown were becoming damp and stained from the dirty, blooded water. Then, at length, she pulled herself together, getting slowly to her feet. She stood over him, tears still glistening in her opaque green eyes.

"I will always love you, no matter what." She whispered. "I gave you my word and I won't ever break it. I don't blame you, Mikamo. Know that I'm not angry with you, wherever you are. You didn't choose this — I know you didn't. You fought… someone did this to you. They did it… they wanted you out of the way. And I will avenge this — trust me, if it takes me all of my years I will avenge it! I *knew* that Kagato was not to be trusted… now I wonder what exactly he made you do that took your life and soul and made you suffer like

this. I won't ever forgive him for destroying my happiness and my future."

She rubbed her hands against her clothing to dry them, feeling something hard beneath her touch and she slid her fingers into her pocket, pulling out the silver key and glancing at it.

"I'll read your notes… then I'll understand what you wanted me to know about this project." She decided sadly. "And when I know that, I'll know how to act."

As she did so, she caught sight of something glittering in the shallow water and she frowned, reaching across to pick it up almost automatically, glancing at it with little interest. As she did so, a fresh stab of shock rippled through her, and she bit her lip.

"The gems." She murmured. "Why did *you* have them? What were you trying to prevent? Oh, Mika-chan, why didn't you confide in me sooner? You think you protected me, but you were just one man. I'm the witch — I'm not so easy to kill. You could have told me… this didn't… it didn't have to happen!"

She cast the gem capsule another glance, making up her mind in an instant.

"Kagato took something precious from me, so I'll take something precious from him." She said blackly. "You took these for a reason, Mika-kun. And I'm going to take them now, so I can find a way to use them to avenge your death. That Prince may think his problems are over, but believe me, they're not. They never will be so long as he has breath in his body. I will kill him, if that's what it takes to lay your spirit to rest."

She closed her eyes once more against her tears.

"Oh Mikamo." She whispered, gently touching his soaked blond hair one final time. "Why didn't you understand that you were the most important thing in the whole world to me? Do you think I'd care, if they came to kill me now? If I knew how, I might do it for them. Don't you realise — I don't want a life without you! I don't want to be alone again!"

She slid the key and the gem capsule into the folds of her damp, soiled Academy gown, casting one last look at the pale corpse that lay on the ground, his fair hair fanned out around him in the shallow water. Then she set her teeth, clenching her fists as she teleported herself back up to the ledge from which he had jumped. Carefully she retrieved his discarded chain, running her finger over it as she fought

to control a fresh wave of emotion and terror. It bore the insignia of the Niwase family, and he had always worn it beneath his scientist's garb for as long as she had known him. The clasp was bent and twisted out of place, and Washu eyed it with a sense of bitter irony.

"Broken, just like our future together." She muttered. "I'll keep your memory, Mikamo. How can I do otherwise? But no matter what you were afraid of, I wish you'd known that losing you is the worst thing I could ever have had to face. Death and madness I could deal with. But being alone again… after I've been so happy and so full of hope… I wish you'd known."

She gripped the chain tightly, closing her eyes for a moment. Then she opened them again, placing the pendant carefully into her pocket with the silver key and the capsule.

"I must go back, and find out what's in Mikamo's files." She said aloud, speaking slowly as she attempted to calm her jumping heart. "And then… and then, when I know everything, I'll know how to take my revenge."

Her eyes narrowed as she launched herself into the air, a faint orange glow enveloping her body as she headed back towards the scientific complex.

"Someone *will* pay for this." She added darkly. "Don't worry, Mikamo. I will *never* forget."

Chapter 10

Chapter Ten

She was all alone once again.

Washu re-materialised in the middle of her chamber, dropping down onto the floor in a huddle of despair as she relived the events out on the ledge one more time. Tears sprang anew into her green eyes and she sank back against the wall, burying her head in her arms as they spilled hopelessly down her cheeks. Fresh pain welled through her as she pictured the desperation and fear in her fiance's eyes and she banged her fists against the wall in frustration, trying to shut the images out.

"Why did I let you make me love you so much?" She whispered, a moment of irrational anger towards the dead man flaring in her heart. "Why did you do this to me, Mikamo? Why would you?"

She sighed, closing her eyes as the anger was replaced with sadness. With a super-human effort, she suppressed the tears, struggling to pull her composure back together as she focused on his last words. The key and the gems burned a hole in her pocket, and she sighed, rubbing her temples as guilt touched her senses.

"No. I won't get angry at you." She murmured. "It wasn't your fault. You didn't choose… I know you didn't. I know you wouldn't! Someone… you got too close to something. And dammit, I will find out what, even if it kills me!"

"Washu?"

From somewhere in her haze of grief, Washu was aware of a voice and a gentle touch on her arm and she swung around, an almost feral look in her green eyes as she pushed the hand away. There was an exclamation of surprise, then someone dropped down at her side, sliding an arm around her shoulders as they hugged her tightly.

"What happened, Washu?" Now Washu knew the voice was Najya's, and something inside of her broke as she buried her head in her friend's shoulder, tears flooding down her cheeks anew as the floodgates opened once more. Unable to contain her emotions, she just clung to her roommate, and Najya stroked her hair gently, holding her tightly until the storm showed signs of passing. At her touch, Washu felt a strange sensation wash through her, and somewhere in her

despair-riddled state it resonated with her, causing her to pull back and stare at her friend in alarm.

“Washu?” Najya’s expression was a mixture of concern and dismay. “You’re covered in blood — are you hurt?”

“Stay away from me.” Washu whispered, shuffling back across the chamber as she flickered energy from the palms of her hands. “Don’t you touch me… whatever you just tried to do, don’t even think of trying it again!”

Najya’s eyes opened wide with surprise, and she shook her head, holding up her hands in mock-surrender.

“I’m not trying to hurt you, Washu. I was just trying to soothe your pain. I’m sorry.” She said quietly. “I thought you were injured and I sought to help you. That’s all. I swear.”

Washu drew a ragged breath into her lungs, staring at her roommate coldly for a moment. Then she lowered her own hands to the floor, dropping her head.

“It doesn’t matter.” She managed softly. “Nothing does, now. If you want to harm me, I don’t care. Do whatever you like. I won’t fight you.”

“Washu, this isn’t like you at all.” Najya hauled her roommate to her feet, coaxing her down onto her bed as she ferretted in her pockets for something to dry the tears. “You’re in floods of tears, your clothes are soaked with blood and you’re acting like some kind of wild animal — like someone might come for you at any minute. What’s happened? Something has, I can tell. And what was that you just did with your hands? Was that… was that some kind of magic?”

“Don’t come that with me.” Washu pulled back from her touch angrily, glaring at her once more. “You touched me with magic too, and you swore to me you had none. You said not all Arians were witches, but you’re one, aren’t you? You’re really a witch and you lied to me — so don’t be angry because I chose to do the same thing!”

“I’m not a witch. I’m a mage. It’s not the same thing at all.” Najya said composedly. “And in fact, I’m a mage-in-waiting, to be quite correct. My father is the one who wields my family’s power. Besides, I told you that not all cults of Airai practiced dark magic. I didn’t lie to you at all. My people are not like the people you hear about, who sacrifice victims and steal souls. We practice white magic — we help, we heal, we nurture and we use our magic for good. Not for evil. But you can see why I sought to hide it. An Arian with magic ability is

always feared."

"Just like a Kii, I suppose." Washu said blackly. Najya nodded her head.

"I suppose." She agreed evenly. "I knew you hid something from me, Washu. But I didn't know what it was."

"It doesn't matter now, anyway." Washu closed her eyes, the fight seeping out of her as quickly as it had come. "Mikamo is dead, so none of it matters. None of it will ever matter again."

"Mikamo is *dead*?" Shock followed by horror flashed through Najya's eyes and she grasped Washu tightly by the hands. "Are you serious? Washu? What on earth happened… my God, are you all right?"

"How can you even ask that?" Washu raised hopeless green eyes to her friend's, finding little of comfort in her companion's dismay. "I let myself love him. I let myself love him, damn it, and now he's left me all a… a… alone a… a… again!"

"Oh, Washu." Najya hugged her friend once more and this time Washu did not fight against the soothing touch of the mage's fingers, as they gently brought her fever-pitch grief under some measure of control. "I wish I could take it all away, but I can't. Will you tell me what happened, at least? I don't understand — how can Mikamo be gone? It makes no sense at all. He was troubled when I saw him — when he gave me the message to bring you to him. But I didn't think… I thought… He seemed to be fighting it. Washu, what happened?"

"He jumped." Washu whispered. "I couldn't stop him. All the magic of Kihaku, and I… I couldn't stop him. He was dead by the time I reached him. Dead and gone and there's no damn magic trick to bring him back!"

"I'm sorry." Najya bit her lip. "I really am. I should have realised… but I'm sorry, Washu. Especially that you had to see it. Then this blood is…"

"It's his blood." Washu nodded her head. "I… I didn't even think about it."

"We need to change your clothes, so noone sees you like this and thinks you had something to do with his death." Najya said decidedly. Washu swallowed hard, struggling to gather the shards of her composure as she gazed on her friend blankly.

“Something to do… with…?”

“You’re covered in his blood, and if people find out you were having an affair…” Najya shook her head.

“But I’d never hurt Mikamo! I’d never… I’d never…”

“I *know* that. That’s why I said I’d help you, if you’ll let me.” Najya said gently. “But you need to calm down. My magic can only soothe you so far, Washu. I can’t get rid of the feelings you have, and you have to bring them under your control. I know you can… for Mikamo, you must. Whyever he did this dreadful thing, he wouldn’t want you accused of his murder, so take a deep breath. Try to regulate your breathing. I know you can.”

Washu stared at her for a moment, then she closed her eyes, focusing all of her will-power on following Najya’s commands. At length she did so, taking in a shaky breath of air as she sought to calm her racing, jumping heart.

“I’m sorry that I lost control.” She said softly. “And I’m sorry that you saw it, in any shape or form. It’s not something I generally do.”

“So you are Kihaku’s priestess. That’s the truth of it.” Najya pursed her lips. “I wondered about that, from time to time. Are you Tokimi, Washu? I knew you hid something from me — is that the secret you carry?”

“No.” Washu shook her head, her heart empty as she met her companion’s gentle gaze. “I’m not Tokimi. Tokimi was my sister..and she was the Priestess. Not me.”

“You are of that tribe though, aren’t you? Washu Hakubi.” Najya sighed, and slowly Washu nodded.

“It was my crown.” She whispered. “But I refused it, and Tokimi took it in my stead. I ran away from my heritage and I’m still running. But even with all this cursed magic coursing through me, I couldn’t save the man I loved from his death. I couldn’t reach him in time — even shifting in a split second wasn’t fast enough to stop his fall.”

She drew another shaky breath, then,

“You concealed yourself well, Najya. I didn’t see your true nature until now. But I know you’ve told me the truth. Your magic isn’t dark magic. And I’m glad. I have noone else in whom to trust at the moment, and if it had been otherwise…”

She sighed, burying her head in her hands.

“I don’t know what to do.” She whispered. “Mikamo told me some things — but I don’t know if I should do as he told me or not. He was half crazy, Najya. I swear, he was out of his wits, that’s why he jumped. It’s the darkness of those gems — I knew they were having an effect. He said we’d unleashed something terrible and that he wanted to keep me safe. That’s all I really understood, before he… he… he jumped. He thought his death was protecting me, but he was hallucinating and he wasn’t in his right mind. So I don’t know what to think, not really. And I’m not sure what I should do now.”

“Do what he asked of you.” Najya said firmly. Washu looked startled.

“You think so?”

“Whatever it was, do it.” Najya nodded. “Whatever the truth of his bewitchment, I’m sure that Prince Kagato can’t be completely ignorant of any of this. And those gems — what do we really know about them? Tsunami is one of the universe’s pure forces. It can’t be easily corrupted, except through use of elemental Arian black magic. That’s why Jurai hate Airai so much. The dark cults pose a threat to their Goddess — she can be weakened and sullied by their enchantments, because she is essentially the planet’s soul, and these cults focus their arts on capturing souls. So if Tsunami’s crystals really did turn Mikamo to suicide, they must have been tainted by something else. Something a lot more dangerous than Jurai’s magic… something a lot more frightening altogether.”

“You think Mikamo discovered this? That’s what he wanted to tell me, before he died?” Washu murmured. Najya shrugged.

“I came to Jurai with two motives. My science was one, and peace was another. My people, the Akara, have long sought the support and alliance of a world like Jurai, in order to bring the Saotome and Mikara clans to heel.” She said pensively. “Between Juraian royal magic and the pure magic of our people and our own allies, we might even drive the cults back and rid our world from the subversive elements for good. I hoped that I might change Juraian opinions of our world, by proving we weren’t all evil. Now… now I wonder if it’s backfired. I know the Saotome have already learnt of our plans and are ahead of us in some regard — Masaru and his daughter still linger here, and they’re in the company of the Prince himself, of that I’ve become certain. They would hate us to become allies of Jurai, and they would do a lot to stand in the way. It worries me. And that’s why you need to do what Mikamo asked you to do.”

“Tell me my fiance did not die because of some petty political

battle between two worlds he didn't even belong to!" Washu flared up, and Najya held up her hands, shaking her head.

"No, I didn't say that." She cautioned. "But consider the work we've done. I believe they've started interfering somehow with the gems. They have connections in high places — that's never been in doubt by any of us. If Mikamo was killed, then someone probably acted to shut him up about something he knew. Maybe if you do what he told you, you'll find out what and be able to avenge his death."

"Avenge him." Washu's eyes narrowed to slits as she contemplated this. Then she nodded, getting to her feet.

"Then I will do as he told me… in the words he managed to muster, there must be a message. Something of importance that I have yet to learn." She said quietly. "I must change, and then I must go."

"I'll come with you."

"No, it might be dangerous." Washu shook her head. Najya smiled faintly.

"I'm used to that." She said simply. "Every day my family fight a war with people who steal souls and bewitch innocent lives. I know Masaru, and I know his ways. I'm not afraid of him or Prince Kagato."

"I don't want you to come, Najya." Washu said bluntly. "Whether you are or you aren't some Arian mage in training, I don't care. If I get killed doing this, I don't care either. But I do care if someone else dies because they were associated with me. So you keep out of it and worry about your little political agenda, all right? I don't mind which planet is friends with which other planet. That's never concerned me. But if someone killed my fiance, they better have a death wish. I will find them, I will discover their secrets and if it takes the rest of my life, I *will* destroy them."

"Are you *sure* you're not the Kii Priestess, Washu?" Najya eyed her quizzically. Washu frowned, shaking her head.

"I told you. I refused the crown. I was never Priestess of Kihaku."

"Funny. You sure sound like it." Najya said off-handedly. "Plotting vengeance on Jurai, just like the legends of Tokimi."

Washu stared at her friend, stricken, and Najya offered her an acerbic smile.

"Let's get you cleaned up." She said simply. "And if anyone asks, you were with me when Niwase-sensei fell. All right? Tell them that and I will back you up. I know you didn't harm him, and I won't have

you blamed for his death. But Washu, whatever you discover, be careful. If you must kill, cover your tracks and don't leave a trail to your door."

"For a white magic mage, you seem pretty okay with the idea of killing." Washu said softly. Najya looked guilty.

"I know. I don't really like it, but it's how life has become." She admitted. "The death of the few to benefit the many. We never asked for an internal, magical war. It broke up our empire and it will break up our very planet if it continues. But that's how life on Airai tends to be, Washu. The very good and the very bad, both tainted by each other's blood."

"For the first time in my life, I have the drive to seek out and kill another living being." Washu owned. "Nothing else ever mattered so much to me, Najya, as having Mikamo."

She bit her lip, fighting the urge to break down once more, and Najya reached across to squeeze her friend by the hand.

"I know." She whispered gently. "And I know he felt the same. I know that, in his right mind, he'd never have left you. That being so…"

Washu nodded her head grimly, glancing down at her soiled clothing.

"I'll keep a sample of this gown." She said firmly, getting slowly to her feet. "My clothes are covered in Mikamo's blood. If I analyse it, maybe I'll find what killed him. Whether the gem's radiation grew worse in him, or whether it was… something else. He was brewing something the other night — something powerful that we'd both been working on. I'm starting to wonder if he found out more than he bargained for."

"Please let me help in some way." Najya begged. "I have no love for the Saotome or their magic. And I'm not so easy to kill as you think. Mikamo-sensei was a good friend of mine, and I'm shocked and grieved at his death too. I'd like to do something to help avenge it… the whole thing makes me so angry, especially seeing you like this. You didn't deserve this, and neither did he."

Washu hesitated, then she shrugged her shoulders.

"Help me clean up." She said softly. "But I need to do this myself, Najya. Heaven help me, I do. If I have to draw on every ounce of devil magic within me, I will. But either way, I have to know why Mikamo died. And someone… someone has to pay for his death! Once I

discover what I need to know, I won't stay on Jurai — I won't linger here a moment longer than I have to, and you might put yourself at further risk if you ally yourself with me."

Najya sighed, then she nodded her head.

"Then know that I support your actions." She said softly. "And that I hope we meet again, Washu Hakubi… under happier circumstances."

Washu faltered for a moment, then she offered a faint, tragic smile.

"Yes." She murmured. "Thank you, Najya. I will remember that."

"Kagato! Kagato, where are you?"

Kagato glanced up from his perch within Tsunami's chapel, eying his cousin with a mixture of wariness and confusion as Yosho hurried into the sandstone shrine, dismay in his normally composed red eyes. As the Prince got to his feet, paranoia stirred within him and he half-wondered whether Yosho knew the truth — and whether he had been sent to confront him. Had he been too late, he wondered absently. Had Mikamo managed to see the Emperor, after all?

"Kagato, There you are." Yosho hastened towards him, pausing for a moment to glance up at the image of Tsunami. Gravely he moved his hands into a gesture of reverence, bowing his head, then he bit his lip, turning back to his companion.

"Kagato, you have to come." He said urgently. "Now. I mean it. Something's happened."

"Something?" Kagato raised an eyebrow. "Yosho, calm down. I don't think I've ever seen you so flurried — what ails you, cousin? Do you have bad news from Haruna?"

"Haruna?" For a moment, Yosho looked blank. Then he shook his head. "No, this is nothing to do with my love for her. Kagato, please. Father sent me to find you — he said it was best heard from one of our own, and Lady Aiko is in agreement. I said I'd come — that I knew you'd spent time at Tsunami's shrine lately, and that I'd see if you were here. Please, cousin, you must come."

"I'm coming." His curiosity aroused, Kagato nodded his head, drawing his cloak more firmly around his body as he allowed the older Prince — older by bare months — to lead him out into the Jurai sunshine. Once outside, Yosho paused, turning to meet his cousin's gaze with a grave one of his own.

“I must tell you before we get there.” He said softly, regret in his tones. “Kagato, I’m sorry to bring such news to you. But… it concerns your friend. Professor Niwase.”

“Mikamo?” Suddenly Kagato’s throat went dry, and he swallowed hard, a mixture of emotions welling through him. “Speak, Yosho. Tell me what you mean.”

Yosho’s eyes softened with compassion at his cousin’s evident distress, and he sighed, shaking his head slowly.

“This morning, on patrol, one of the guard units discovered him in the valley beyond the shrine.” He said softly. “To all appearances, my friend, the man seems to have jumped from the ledge above. He was… he was quite dead when the man found him, and he immediately sent to the palace to notify Grandfather and Father. I was with Father at the time, and so was Lady Aiko. She asked us both to go ourselves, knowing what a good friend he was to you. And so here I am, conveying a message I would rather not have to bring you. I’m sorry, Kagato. I know you and Mikamo-sama were close friends and for many years.”

For a moment, Kagato was unable to speak, taken aback by the overwhelming feeling of grief and remorse that washed over his senses. Then he nodded his head slowly.

“I see.” He said softly. “Then if you don’t mind, Yosho, I’d like to see for myself, too.”

“Of course.” Yosho agreed soberly. “I thought you might say that. Father has ordered noone to touch the scene until we return. He wasn’t sure that you’d want to see, but I thought that you’d rather know everything… exactly as it is.”

“Yes. Indeed.” Kagato agreed faintly. “I’m sorry, Cousin. This can’t have been easy news to convey.”

“You have nothing to apologise for.” Yosho said simply. “To be honest, I cannot understand why he would have done this thing. I knew he was troubled over a woman when first he arrived, but he seemed in such good humour of late. Not that I spoke to him often, but I could never detect a sense of despair about his person.”

“No. Mikamo was never that kind of man.” Kagato agreed absently, as they drew closer to the edge of the ravine, making their way down the steep rocky path towards the shallow stream that ran through the land. As they approached, Kagato could make out the colours of his Uncle’s state robes, and he bit his lip, suddenly unwilling to see the

end product of his conspiring with Arian magic. He frowned, steeling himself as they drew closer, and Azusa glanced up at their arrival, offering his nephew a grave bow.

"Kagato, I'm sorry." He said softly. "If you don't want to come closer…"

"No. No, I must know. I must see… everything." Kagato held up his hands, pushing forwards to where a couple of the palace guardsmen were hovering around something still and bruised in the water. Blood had spilled into the normally crystal liquid, giving it an odd reddish hue, and as he came closer, Kagato saw that his friend's thick blond hair was also tinted with the liquid that had poured from a wound across his brow. He was pale and silent, his eyes closed, and Kagato felt another pang of regret. Slowly he waded into the water, aware of the blood now staining his boots as he crouched at his friend's side, placing a gentle hand on Mikamo's shoulder.

"You won't need to take Mikamo's life, that I promise you. By the time I'm done with him, the good professor will relinquish it of his own accord. Willingly."
Masaru's chilling words washed through him suddenly, and he jerked his fingers back from the corpse in alarm.

"He wasn't kidding." He murmured to himself, too softly for anyone to hear. "This is the power of Arian magic. The power to sever all important ties in the pursuit of one goal."

"We will take him to the palace, and prepare his body for transport to Seniwa. His family must be informed." Azusa's voice broke through the Prince's musings and he glanced up, standing upright as he nodded his head. Hesitantly he made the gesture of blessing over his friend's body, half-berating himself for such an instinctive Juraian reaction as he did so. It had been harder than he had thought, killing a friend. And even as he stood, the memory of his last chat with his mother echoed through his mind.

"Is this all for nothing? Will I have to kill her too, if this is truly what I want?" He mused. "I had no idea I would regret Mikamo's death as much as this. I swear, my friend, that this won't be in vain. I won't have taken your life only to stop at the first hurdle. And I pray that wherever you are, you can forgive me. Somehow. Sometimes we do things that we do not like, in order to achieve our dreams."

He cast one last look at the corpse, then he turned, heading back to the shore to where his Uncle and cousin waited. Slowly he bowed his head.

“I’m finished.” He said quietly. “We should bring him to the palace, as you said, Ojisama. This is no place for a respected man of Seniwa, after all.”

“And you can think of no reason why Mikamo-sensei should take his own life, Oi-san?” Azusa asked. Kagato shook his head solemnly.

“As Yosho said, he was in good spirits.” He said sadly. “But of late, he had become distracted and perhaps the stress of work took its toll on him.”

“You feel to blame, don’t you, Cousin?” Yosho asked, and Kagato started, panic racing through his senses for the briefest instant until he realised what his cousin meant. He shrugged, spreading his blood-flecked fingers as he did so.

“Perhaps.” He owned. “After all, I brought him to Jurai. I involved him in my studies. And now… this.”

“You shouldn’t be so hard on yourself.” Yosho said gently. “Come on, Kagato. Your mother would like to see you too, I think. Let Father and his men see to bringing Lord Niwase back to the palace. This is no place for a grieving friend.”

Kagato bit his lip, allowing himself to be led from the scene with a measure of bitter relief. At least, he mused, it didn’t appear that his friend had had time to spill his secrets.

“And that’s something. Masaru’s spell must’ve acted quickly.” He murmured. “And now I have to put this behind me and move on. After all, there is a greater aim in all of this. More than one man’s life. Mikamo is dead, therefore he is no longer a threat to what I do. And I must gather myself for the next move… finding out exactly what my mother’s power truly is!”

Chapter 11

Chapter Eleven

The lab was deserted when Washu arrived, and, as she grimly phased her slim body through the door of Mikamo's rear office, she realised that she was glad of the fact. Since the discovery of her fiance's body early that morning, the whole palace had been buzzing with news of his suicide, and, unable to bear it any longer, Washu's instincts to pull herself away from her companions had won through, seeking comfort as well as answers in the room that had so many reassuring signs of science and normality about it.

For a moment she paused, running her fingers over Mikamo's desk.

"You wanted to tell me something, and I'm listening, Mikamo." She whispered, tears still in her eyes as she fumbled in her pocket for the key he had given her. Her fingers brushed against the gem capsule as she did so, and her expression hardened as she nodded her head decidedly.

"The gems stay with me, whatever I find out." She murmured. "Mikamo said we'd been messing with forces we didn't understand. He had to mean these crystals. If I have them, then they can't be used to hurt anyone else. And if they hurt me, so be it. Noone could possibly hurt me worse than I've already been, after all. If they kill me, at least I'll be with him again. I'm not afraid of that."

She slipped the key into the desk drawer, turning it cleanly in the lock as she pulled the wooden compartment open, glancing at the mass of papers and odds and ends within. For a moment she stared at it, unable to see what it was her fiance had so badly wanted her to see. Then her breath caught in her throat as she saw a plain coloured file, three distinctive characters scrawled across the front.

"My name." She whispered, sinking down into Mikamo's empty seat as she slid her fingers beneath the file, pulling it out with shaking hands. "In Seniwan script. Whatever it was, he didn't mean others to read it. Whatever's in here — it must have been for my benefit. Maybe he knew this was going to happen before it did. Perhaps he's been fighting it a lot longer than I realised."

Slowly she opened the folder, pulling out the sheets of notepaper from within, and for a moment she just stared at it, taking in the

familiar curl of her fiance's distinctive script as she did so. Gently she ran her fingers over the page, remembering the many letters of assignation he had written to her when they had been at the Academy. They had also been written in his native tongue, and Washu had always considered it something of a secret code between them at the time. Now, she realised, it was so again — but this time it was not love that Mikamo concealed in his writing. It was something which had, more than likely, led to his untimely death.

Washu steeled herself, turning her attention back to the matter at hand as she spread the sheets out before her. The top one, she soon realised, dealt with the detailed analysis of his blood samples and Washu pursed her lips as she read over his conclusions.

"Anomalies, sure enough." She murmured. "But not enough to drive you to this. This is the work of a sane, coherent mind, Mikamo-kun. If you'd been… as you were this morning, then you'd never have managed to put it all down so concisely. If the gems were really the thing that killed you, wouldn't you have suffered more than this sooner? It makes no sense."

She glanced at the next sheet, shock flaring in her green eyes as she registered the chemical formulae scrawled at the top.

"My serum!" She exclaimed. "I knew it! I knew that had to be a part of this! I left it to Mikamo to handle, and he was mixing it up the other night. I saw him. He wouldn't tell me who it was for, or why… but I'm sure it was Prince Kagato. Otherwise he would have denied it. Is that what killed you, Mika-chan? An overdose of this dark potion of ours?"

She scanned down the page, pursing her lips as her finger paused against a lengthy paragraph at the bottom.

"*The impact of the magic of these gems seems, at the very least, potentially destructive, especially if they should fall into the wrong hands.*" She murmured, reading the words aloud as she struggled to make sense of them. "*My work with crystals over the past few years has taught me that very few stones can resist the addition of energy, however the Dark Heart Of Jurai seems to be more difficult to infiltrate than other stones of similar mass and consistancy. I can only conclude that they possess strong magic that is not easily corrupted. This leads me to suspect, therefore, that the addition of any magic to these crystals could, potentially, be a hazard to the health of anyone who used them, unless the gems had not first been refined to suit the individual in question.*"

"You're speaking in tongues, my love." She muttered, sitting back

as she digested his words. “I suppose you feared someone else might read your report, but I need to understand more clearly! I need to draw this all together and make sense of what it is you want me to know. You told me to leave Jurai, and I will — I will indeed. But not until I understand fully what you died for. There has to be more to it than this. We all knew that our work involved transferance of energy and the Dark Heart of Jurai.”

She frowned, returning her gaze to the paragraph.

“Refined to suit the individual in question.” She murmured, tapping the page thoughtfully as she did so. “Is that it? The key to all this? Mikamo, is that what you wanted to tell me? That this project wasn’t generally for the benefit of Jurai’s magic-practicing class? Perhaps I’ve been stupid, not realising how things connect together before this. Or distracted by the fact you were here — I had so many more pleasant things to consider then, my love.”

Her eyes narrowed to near slits as she debated.

“These gems were being tailored to suit Prince Kagato.” She whispered. “That’s what you meant, when you let slip that he felt his life was in danger. And I’ve never quite trusted that man. But why? What could he have to gain from it?”

She sighed, rubbing her temples.

“Oh, Washu, you are a fool.” She said bitterly. “What else would he have to gain? The throne of Jurai, of course! If he had power like this at his disposal, he could eliminate other claimants and be proclaimed King in his own right. It wasn’t a political battle between Airai and Jurai that killed you, Mika-chan. It was an arrogant, greedy Prince who you trusted as your friend, because you knew too much about this damn experiment of his!”

Rage flooded through her and energy prickled from her fingers at the thought.

“I’ll make him pay, don’t you worry.” She muttered, pressing her palm to the papers and watching as her strange ancient magic licked flame around the edges of the sheets. “I won’t forget a single word I’ve read, or what you were trying to make me know. How you died no longer seems to matter as much as why — and I’m sure I know why, now.”

She got to her feet, reaching into her pocket and pulling out the gem capsule, eying it pensively.

“But you took this, and I have them now.” She added. “I’ll take

them from Jurai, now I know what I'm dealing with. And I'll find a way to use them against that Prince and his evil behaviour. He'll regret making an enemy of a Kii, I swear. On my life, Mikamo, I will avenge you or die in the attempt!"

She slid the gems back into the folds of her cloak, re-fastening the drawer and brushing the ashes neatly into the waste disposal unit, watching with an empty heart as they flickered out of sight. Then she summoned her magic once more, phasing back into the main lab and teleporting herself back to her chamber. It was empty, and Washu found she was glad of the solitude. She sank down onto her bed, glancing briefly around at her surroundings as she worked out her next plan of action.

"Gather anything that matters to me, return to the Academy." She murmured. "With Mikamo dead, the project is effectively over anyway. But before I go… there's one more thing I need. Mikamo, you said these gems had been refined to suit one individual — the Prince himself. I can't even touch them… so I have to find a way to overcome that. I wonder if the good Prince would mind parting with some of his genetic material, before I go? There must be something I can do with his genetic structure to use these against him in some way."

She drew her hands together, re-materialising on an upper branch of the Tenju palace as she observed the chaos below.

"I don't know whether Mikamo told Kagato about his relationship with me or if he didn't." She realised. "Which is another reason for me to leave Jurai. If he makes a connection of that nature between us, he might realise I know more than he'd like. And even if I don't care if he kills me, I can't avenge Mikamo's murder if I'm dead myself. I have to be cautious. I've not used my magic so much as this in ages, and I don't want to be caught. If the Academy find out what kind of Kii I am now, I'll be in a whole other slew of trouble… and right now I need the Academy to withdraw to."

She edged along the branch, knowing that the chambers belonging to the Prince she sought were not far from where she stood, and a quick surveillance of the area indicated that Kagato was nowhere in residence.

"I guess he's pretending how sorry he is Mikamo died." She said bitterly. "Covering up his deeds with crocodile tears. Well, that suits me just fine. All I need is a little of his DNA. I can work with that in the lab, and he need never know."

She pressed her hands up against the window of the chamber,

hesitating for a moment, then phasing through into the room itself. Kagato's bedchamber was immaculately tidy, nothing out of place, and with a jolt Washu realised that the Prince had probably not even been to bed yet.

"Staying up, waiting for news of your friend's demise, were we?" She muttered. "You make me more and more angry the more I know. Well, Mikamo might have trusted in you, Kagato, but I never fully did. And I will make you pay for this. If I can prevent you taking hold of Jurai and hurting more innocent lives, I will. I don't care who's King of this planet, but I care when someone I love is a victim of someone's greed!"

She crossed the floor of the chamber purposefully, casting a careful glance around her for anything she could use. At length her gaze rested on Kagato's hairbrush, lying unattended on the dresser, and a slow, cold smile spread across her lips.

"Perfect." She whispered, picking up the implement and glancing at the thin strands of rich teal hair that wound themselves around the fibres. Carefully she disentangled several from their resting place, glancing at them and nodding her head.

"Well, Prince Kagato." She muttered. "We'll see, won't we, just what kind of man you are. You will regret murdering my fiance, mark my words. I will never, ever let you get away with this, and I will never, ever forget!"

"My Lord?"

Kagato glanced up from his desk, casting Tessei a weary look as he pushed his papers aside, resting his chin in his hands. It had been a hard morning, he reflected, not made any easier by his sleepless night, and the truth of his friend's demise weighed heavily on his mind. For the first time, he realised, he had noone with whom he could truly be himself — only those who sought power or support from him, and the idea troubled him more than he liked to admit.

"What do you want, Tessei?" He asked now. "I thought I told you that I didn't want disturbing."

"Lord Masaru wishes to see you. He and Lady Ramia seek to leave Jurai this afternoon, but he wishes to speak to you first." Tessei bowed his head respectfully, though Kagato saw the insolence flickering in the depths of the man's strange eyes. "Shall I bring him through, my Prince?"

“Masaru?” Kagato faltered, then grimaced. “Yes. You better had. Then leave us, Tessei. Mikamo’s family are summoned from Seniwa. They may arrive this afternoon, or late this evening — but I want you to ensure all is in order for when they do. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.” Tessei bowed again, then withdrew.

“Well, Kagato.”

Even as the knight left the room, the voice of the Arian mage echoed out through the chamber and Masaru materialised before the desk, offering the prince a slight smile. “You seem troubled. Don’t tell me you’re troubled by the execution of a necessary act.”

“No. I’m fine.” Kagato raised his gaze to his companion’s, eying him opaquely. “Your method was efficient indeed. Everyone believes Mikamo jumped from the ledge. If the family choose to autopsy, Masaru, will they find any trace of your spell in his system?”

“Magic of this nature cannot be quantified by scientific method. Not even the expertise of your Juraian scientists.” Masaru shook his head. “They won’t find anything except what we want them to find — that Mikamo Niwase took his own life, for reasons unknown. I heard you Cousin the Prince Yosho mention women trouble. Perhaps he was heartsick.”

A sinister smile touched his lips at this, and Kagato’s eyes widened.

“Women…” he murmured. “I’d almost forgotten. With everything… Mikamo’s woman!”

“Ah. Another loose end?” Masaru asked questioningly. Kagato shrugged his shoulders.

“I don’t know.” He snapped. “Mikamo swore to me that he never told a soul about our experiments or my secrets. And I trusted him.”

“Enough to kill him in cold blood, in fact.” Masaru said archly. “You have a strange concept of trust, my Prince… if I may say so.”

“I didn’t ask for your analysis.” Kagato returned neatly. “Tessei says you and Ramia are leaving Jurai.”

“Yes. In light of Mikamo Niwase’s death, it seems wise.” Masaru inclined his head. “On Airai, we will be better protected. I just came to remind you of our blood promise, Kagato. You swore to me to take care of the Akara girl, and I want to make sure you haven’t forgotten your word to your kin. Remember that ill fortune strikes those who break the blood bond of my hexed blade.”

“I haven’t forgotten. She’s next on my to do list.” Kagato said bitterly. “Anything else?”

“You sound so weary of it all, Kagato.” Masaru reflected. “Is that truly the depth of your ambition? And I thought you claimed kin to the Saotome?”

“I do, and I’m not weary of my goals. I’m weary through lack of sleep.” Kagato rubbed his temples. “I will take care of the Akara woman, don’t you worry. You and Ramia can leave Jurai, if that’s your wish. Najya Akara will be dealt with. You have my word in bond, after all.”

“That’s good to hear.” Masaru offered him a chilling smile. “Then until we meet again, kinsman, I wish you well.”

With that he flickered out of view, and Kagato muttered a curse under his breath, moving to the window.

“Mikamo’s woman. The scientist Washu.” He murmured. “And Najya Akara. The list of people I must eliminate grows ever longer. And yet, Masaru is right. I must hold onto my resolve and see it through. For the time being, I will worry about these things, and not my mother’s latent magical ability. I did not see any sign of it about her today — not like I did when she spoke of Lady Misaki’s ill health. Perhaps it was just a hallucination after all. Maybe it was Mikamo’s drug that made me see it — that and my own tiredness. Either way, I will leave it until I have no choice but to face it. I will not put an end to another person that matters to me if I can help it. I’d rather focus my energy on those scientists. They, at least, won’t spark such guilt and regret inside me. Like my father, they are nothing to me… and the sooner I eliminate Najya Akara, the sooner Masaru can stop implying threats of bad luck.”

He slipped his cloak once more around his shoulders, leaving his study as he made his way slowly across the palace grounds towards the scientific complex where he knew both of his targets resided. Greeting the guards on duty with a pleasant, if muted smile, he stepped through the doors, realising absently that he would never again use this place now that Mikamo was dead.

“It’s strange, but I don’t want to.” He murmured. “The Dark Heart of Jurai is improved… and I will learn to master it, now Mikamo has achieved what I hoped he would. There’s no need to unsettle his ghost by persisting in this place, after all.”

He mounted the stairs two at a time, hurrying towards the chamber which he knew had housed both Najya and Washu since their arrival

on his planet, pausing as he reached the top of the stairs and realised that the door was somewhat ajar. A frown touched his lips and he approached it cautiously, pressing his fingers to the wood as he pushed it back.

One half of the room seemed strangely bare, and he stepped inside, his gaze roving across the chamber as he sought to understand what he was seeing.

“Prince Kagato.”

A soft voice came from behind him, and he turned, meeting Najya’s grave eyes with guarded ones of his own.

“Dr Akara.” he said evenly. “I’ve come seeking your friend… Professor Hakubi.”

“Washu is not here.” Najya said unecessarily, sitting down on her bed as she did so.

“Then perhaps you can tell me where she is?” Kagato asked. “I’m concerned about her well being. I know… Mikamo confided in me about… certain aspects of his life here. I cannot find her anywhere, and I am… I am concerned for her safety.”

“Are you?” Najya’s eyes became flinty, and Kagato frowned, seeing something unearthly in the depths of her ruby eyes. “I see.”

She shrugged her shoulders.

“I can put your mind at rest, then, Prince Kagato.” She said softly. “Washu is quite well. But in light of events, she has chosen not to stay on Jurai. She’s gone. This morning, she told me that she wouldn’t be back here. Mikamo’s death came as a shock.”

“To leave Jurai so soon seems strange to me.” Kagato pursed his lips.

“If Mikamo-sensei did indeed confide in you, Kagato-sama, you’d know that he and Washu shared a very special bond.” Najya said quietly. “One which would have brought them both great happiness. But Mikamo-sama’s family are not the kind of people who would understand. Washu doesn’t wish to encounter them again, not while she is so vulnerable. She has gone home. That’s all. Can you blame her? Would you really think she’d stay around to be roundly abused by people who have dismissed her once based solely on her heritage?”

“I see.” Kagato digested this. “And yet, to leave so quickly…”

“Mikamo-sensei is dead. Your project has lost its leader, therefore

it's over." Najya said impassively. "Why should she stay?"

"Then why are you still here, Dr Akara?" Kagato asked curiously. Najya's lips twitched into an emotionless smile.

"Because I know that, when I do leave Jurai, I won't be alone." She murmured. "While I'm here, my death would be suspicious, wouldn't it? But if I were to be attacked outside of Jurai space… who would be any the wiser?"

"What are you suggesting?" Kagato was immediately on his guard, and Najya shook her head slowly.

"I know what you are." She said evenly. "You hide it behind Jurai manners and your mother's kind heart. But you are a Saotome, and you reek of their black magic. I heard you, conspiring with Masaru and his brat of a daughter about bringing about my death. You know as well as I do that I'm not just a scientist, and that my name isn't a coincidence. You want me dead to please your blood family, and I don't feel like obliging you."

Anger and alarm flared in Kagato's heart, and Najya looked faintly amused.

"You seem surprised." She said frankly. "Did you kill Mikamo because he knew you were bastard born, Prince Kagato? Because if so, you've wasted your time. I know that secret too. So do my people. I knew your father, and so did my sister. You can't eliminate all of the Akara, not even if you boast to Masaru about the might of Jurai."

"You underestimate me." Kagato said darkly. "You're foolish to reveal such things to me, when we are quite alone."

"That just shows how little you know about the Akara." Najya said softly. "Or about Arian magic in general."

Her eyes narrowed.

"I came here hoping to form an alliance with your planet, and I had no intention of betraying your heritage." She added. "I respect your mother, and I would not disgrace her by revealing it. Not even Washu knows who you truly are, and I have trusted her with much of my other secrets. But I saw Mikamo, before he fell to his death. And I picked up the scent of Saotome magic on him. Masaru may have been the one performing the hex, but it was with your knowledge, Kagato-sama. On your order. I'm not foolish. I see how you've allied yourself with the dark in your heritage instead of the light. You might think that killing your way to the throne will bring you happiness, but you are a fool. In the end, you suffer under a curse far more oppressive

than the one you had placed on Mikamo."

"Shut up." Kagato snapped, drawing his sword and holding it aloft. "I'm not just a Prince of Jurai, or a mage of Airai. I have both magics inside of me… and you are only the Akara mage's daughter. Masaru told me himself that you are his heiress, but that you don't have his kind of strength."

"And what of killing an Arian on Jurai soil?" Najya darted neatly out of the way of his blade.

"I don't care." Kagato said grimly. "I will do whatever is necessary to succeed. And your own words have condemned you… you know too much and you must be silenced."

"No. My words have condemned *you*." Najya shook her head, derision in her ruby eyes. "This life you live will never bring you happiness, Kagato-sama. Your blade already darkens with the evil of the Saotome. Whatever you seek, it will never bring you happiness. You are another of Masaru's blind puppets — a man deceived by ambition and greed. But you are no true Prince of Jurai, and Tsunami would never endorse your magic, tainted as it is by the blood of those around you. You may become King, and you may live to be an old man. But you will still die wanting, I guarantee it."

"How little you understand me." Kagato's eyes glittered with rage, and Najya snorted.

"How little you understand *life*." She said flatly. "Mikamo is dead, but even so, he is in a better place than you are. He was loved, Kagato, by many people who will care at his passing. And maybe even avenge it, too. Would anyone avenge you? I doubt it. You deceive many, but in the end, they will all see your true nature. They'll see you as I do — the ugly heart behind the handsome face."

"I told you already, shut up!" Kagato swung his sword once more, this time catching Najya across the arm, and she let out a yell as blood spilled through her clothing onto her Science Academy clothing. She clutched at her wound, sending him a look of hatred.

"You haven't learnt." She snapped. "You seek to treat with Arians, but you don't understand our magic. If you think you can kill me with a blade powered by a tainted Tsunami, you'll have to think again. Appearances are deceptive, and you cannot slay me so simply."

"I'm more powerful than you know." Kagato launched himself at her again, this time glancing a blow across the front of her uniform, and Najya flinched, pain crossing her face.

“If you want me so badly, you’ll have to come find me.” She whispered, meeting his gaze with a cold one of his own. “Come find me and kill me, if you dare, bastard Prince of Jurai. Come to Airai and meet my challenge, in the home of my people. Prove you know more than you seem to about slaying the daughters of Akara mages.”

With that she shimmered and disappeared, and Kagato bit his lip, sheathing his sword as he hurried out of the chamber, glancing around him for any sign of her.

“Damn.” He muttered. “More complications. Masaru was right — killing Najya Akara was more important than I realised. And my sword may have cut through her body, but she still had the power to withdraw. I don’t understand… and right now, understanding isn’t important. I need to find Tessei and Tetta, and I need to track the Akara girl’s movements. From what she said, she’ll be heading home to Airai to seek treatment for her injuries, and I must keep my word to Masaru and slay her. I must stop her reaching her destination.”

He frowned, a troubled look flickering across his expression as he remembered her cold, cutting words, and he sighed, shaking his head.

“And Washu Hakubi.” He murmured. “Leaving Jurai so quickly… why? So soon after her love dies, she runs away? She must know something. Another loose end. I have to tie that one up as well, if I want to succeed in this plan.”

He made his way carefully down to the lab at the bottom of the stairs, and as he did so, he was accosted by Tetta, an urgent look on his brusque features.

“Lord Kagato!”

“What is it, Tetta?” Kagato snapped, pushing the knight aside. “I have things to do — I can’t be troubled by petty matters!”

“It’s not a petty matter.” Tetta shook his head. “Lord Kagato — it’s about the Dark Heart of Jurai!”

“The Dark Heart?” Kagato froze, turning to stare at his servant in surprise, and Tetta nodded, a troubled look on his face as he bowed his head towards his master.

“Yes.” He said flatly. “Prince Kagato… the gems are gone!”

AFTER THE RAIN: END OF PART TWO